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Perceptions of Special Education Directors of the Superintendent's Role in Special Education Leadership: Voices from the Field

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Perceptions of Special Education Directors of the Superintendent's Role in Special Education Leadership: Voices from the Field

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Dedication

This treatise is dedicated to my family: Diana, Gabby, Eva, and Alex. Without your sacrifices and support, I could never have finished.

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Perceptions of Special Education Directors of the Superintendent's Role in Special Education Leadership: Voices from the Field

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

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School district leaders who have been well-prepared can positively impact student achievement in their school districts. In the area of special education, however, some superintendents appear to be less well-prepared for their role. Perhaps as a result, studies investigating superintendents' roles and responsibilities in special education have revealed a focus primarily on the areas of budgeting and legal compliance when working with special education directors. While the responsibilities of the superintendent may be established in the eyes of the superintendent (Chaffin, 2013; Cope, 2002; Porter, 1999; Volpe, 2006), what is not well known is what special education directors perceive as the role of the superintendent in regards to special education (Volpe, 2006; Thompson & O'Brian, 2007).

This study focused on the perceptions of special education directors on the role of superintendents in special education and the relationship between special education directors and superintendents. The study serves as an explorative qualitative study using grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Data was collected through interviews of

special education directors and a review of publicly accessible documents. Participants were selected from currently-practicing special education directors in public school districts who have served in that capacity for at least two years.

Major findings of this study suggest that self-perception of the role of special education directors is broader than what is revealed in current literature. The findings also support a number of roles for the superintendent in special education beyond finance and legal compliance and that special education directors perceive their relationship with the superintendent as both indirect and informal.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

There exists research linking superintendents' leadership to academic success of students in their districts and even detailing the role superintendents play in achieving that academic success (Marzano & Waters, 2012). Research and guidance, specifically on the role that superintendents should play in the academic achievement of students with disabilities, however, is limited. The need for such research has only grown as federal law has focused more attention on the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) requires states to establish performance goals for students with disabilities. The law also requires states to publicly report the performance data of students with disabilities, an expectation in alignment with No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), which stipulates states, districts, and schools report the participation and performance results of students from major racial/ethnic groups, students who are economically disadvantaged, and students with limited English proficiency. Since 2004, districts have had to meet federal performance targets for students in special education programs, or they risk the likelihood of failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress as defined by NCLB.

Despite the new laws, according to the Nation's Report Card published by the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), of students with disabilities that were assessed, only 25% have been able to demonstrate a knowledge base at or above basic skills in math by 12th grade and only 37% of students with disabilities perform at or above a basic skill level in reading by 12th grade. If the level of academic achievement is

not enough, the sheer numbers of students, whose disabilities can range from speech impediments to profound physical or intellectual exceptionalities, demand the attention of superintendents and researchers. As of the 2012–2013 school year, 13% of all students enrolled in public schools in the U.S. were identified as students with a disability amounting to almost six and a half million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). And, as noted earlier, the achievement of these students continues to lag behind despite an increase in accountability pressures to improve their academic performance as measured by scores on standardized tests.

It is well known that most students with disabilities are not successful on their standardized tests and fall behind their peers. This could be attributed to certain conditions and factors including the leadership of the school district superintendent who is usually charged to ensure the academic success of all students. However, it is not clear from the literature what specific role a superintendent plays within special education. Similarly, there is an absence of clarity regarding how superintendents relate to and work with special education directors who oversee district-wide special education programs. A review of literature on the context in which superintendents enact their role reveals superintendents having limited guidance from educational leadership standards and evaluation instruments and generally minimal understanding of the unique needs of students with disabilities (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2014a, 2014b; Cusson, 2010; Outka, 2010; Smith, 2007). As a result, it appears superintendents fall back on what they know about special education attending to legal compliance and budgeting (Chaffin, 2013; Cope, 2002; Porter, 1999; Volpe, 2006). In addition, superintendents tend to rely on their special education directors; however, few have focused on directors'

perceptions associated with the role of the superintendent and how they work with them to ensure that all students experience success (Thompson & O'Brian, 2007; Volpe, 2006). Therefore, illuminating special education directors' voices may yield relevant insight and information that may contribute to refining the role of the superintendent and may clarify how they actually work with special education directors.

This study purports to examine the perceptions of special education directors in regards to the role of the superintendent and their relationship with the superintendent in the area of special education. This chapter contains the context of the problem, a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, research questions, and a brief overview of the methodology used in the study. A list of key terms and definitions is also provided, followed by the study's delimitations, limitations, and assumptions. This chapter ends with an explanation of the significance of the study.

CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEM

The role of the superintendent in special education has evolved over time partly in response to federal law. In the 1960s and 1970s the federal government increasingly became interested in issues of special education culminating with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975. While the law created access to public schools for thousands of children with disabilities, Gerber (2011) reported how many believed, including then-President Ford, that the cost burdens to local school districts would increase. Budgeting for special education became part of the responsibilities of the superintendent.

Two other changes in federal law significantly affected the role of the superintendent in special education. In 2002, NCLB set an ambitious goal for all children to improve in reading and math achievement on standardized tests. In 2004, the reauthorization of IDEA made students with disabilities an explicit accountability group with the "all children" written into NCLB (2002). With federal accountably firmly in place for students with disabilities, superintendents were formally charged with improving the achievement of students with disabilities. Given the current cost of special education programming along with the pressure of meeting federal requirements, it is no wonder that, according to Larson, Levine, Vita, and Young (2012), many superintendents believe special education costs are compromising general education programs.

Within the context of rising legal responsibilities and costs for special education, superintendents who looked for guidance in policies and standards found little help. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards, a widely cited set of school leadership standards, failed to mention special education either in their 2008 standards or their draft for the upcoming 2015 standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008a, 2014a). In addition, studies of general education and special education administrator evaluation instruments have little to no mention of special education or administrator accountability for the achievement of students with disabilities (Elliott & Clifford, 2014; Smith, 2007). With no standards or evaluation instruments to guide them, superintendents have been left to determine the separation of responsibilities between special education directors and superintendents in special education.

Furthermore, most superintendents gained little of the knowledge necessary to lead special education programs in their formal training and university preparation (Pazey & Cole, 2013). Researchers have found that superintendents have taken only a minimal number of courses devoted to special education during their university preparation programs and that has not changed in 20 years (Cussom, 2010; Valesky & Hirth, 1992). With little special education coursework to develop their understanding and opinions, superintendents might find it hard to determine what areas of special education need their attention and what areas are better left to a special education director. Pazey and Cole (2013), writing about the preparation of general education administration, stated, "Without question, equity of opportunity for children, including students with disabilities, requires a clear and solid understanding of special education and special education law" (p. 262).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The role of the superintendent in leading a school district has been well studied. Among others, Olivarez (2010) developed a list of ten district functions for which superintendents must be prepared to provide leadership. While general administration preparation programs have prepared superintendents in many of these areas, superintendents appear to be less well-prepared in the area of special education (Pazey & Cole, 2013). This apparent lack of formal preparation may influence superintendents to delegate authority to special education directors to raise the academic achievement of students with disabilities. The delegation of authority may leave superintendents acting in a minimal role in special education, possibly creating two separate education systems, one led by general education staff and superintendents and the other by special education

directors. Lashley (2007) warns against such a dual system as it may be harmful to the achievement of students with disabilities.

Even if they assume only a minor role, superintendents do perform a part in leading special education departments through their working relationship with the special education director. Studies examining superintendents' perception of their role in regards to special education show superintendents pay most of their attention to financial and legal concerns (Chaffin, 2013; Outka, 2010; Volpe, 2006). Similarly, studies on what superintendents find as important to the role of special education director discovered that managing a budget and ensuring regulatory compliance are most important (Chaffin, 2013; Cope, 2002; Porter, 1999). Thus, it appears that what superintendents think in terms of their responsibility in special education is clear.

Likewise, research on the perceptions of special education directors on their own job functions has also established their thinking. In fact, special education directors appear to mirror the views of superintendents in their belief that managing budgets and ensuring special education programs comply with legal requirements are their top job functions (Gunnell, 2013; Porter, 1999; Smith, 2007; Thompson & O'Brian, 2007; Torgerson, 1997). However, what is not well-known is what special education directors perceive to be the role of the superintendent in regards to special education (Thompson & O'Brian, 2007; Volpe, 2006). Determining their perception could contribute to enhancing superintendents' understanding of their role in the area of special education, which in turn would promote a stronger working relationship between superintendents

and special education directors. A strong relationship could advance a better delivery of services for students in special education programs.

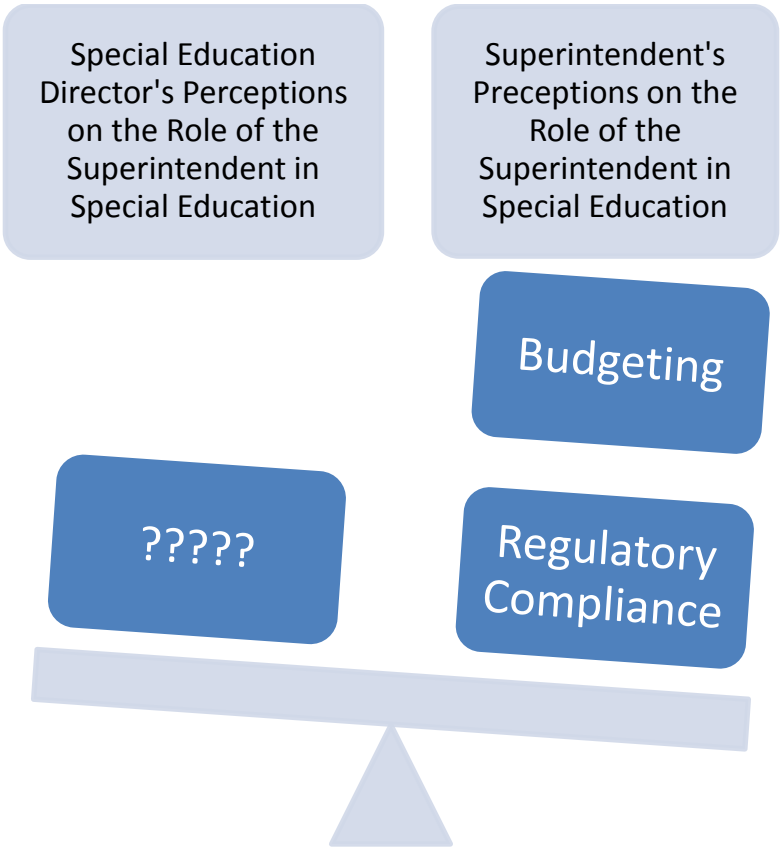

Figure 1: Balance of Perceptions

PURPOSE OF STUDY

According to previous researchers, there is a need for further inquiry to better understand the role of the superintendent from special educators' perspectives (Volpe, 2006). Similarly, as Thompson and O'Brian (2007) obesrve, "It is clear that soliciting the ideas and perspectives of special education directors and other administrators is critical to obtaining a greater understanding of leadership issues in the field [of special education]" (p. 43). The purpose of this study was to examine special education directors' perceptions about the role of the superintendent in the area of special education and the working relationship between special education directors and superintendents. Future researchers may use the results from this exploratory study to launch future investigations about special education directors and superintendent leadership of special education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were examined to address the purpose:

1. What do special education directors perceive to be the role of the superintendent in special education?

2. What are special education directors' perceptions about their working relationship with the superintendent?

OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY

This was an exploratory qualitative research study using grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). A qualitative study allowed the researcher to gain a richer understanding of special education directors' perceptions about the role of

superintendents and their working relationship beyond the information gleaned from surveys more commonly used in this area of study. Using grounded theory allowed theoretical explanations to emerge from the data gathered (Mertens, 2010). The use of grounded theory allowed theoretical explanations to be more closely aligned to the answers of those interviewed than they would be using a pre-existing theoretical framework. Given the limited research into special education directors' perceptions of the superintendent's role, an exploratory study could lay the groundwork for future studies in this area.

Data collection was conducted through personal, unstructured interviews and document reviews. Interviews provided richer description of the perceptions of participants than that of existing literature on the subject, while a document review helped validate data or highlighted contradictions between interviewee experiences and publicly documented goals and objectives. Participants were special education directors in public school districts in Texas. Superintendents who also acted as special education directors were excluded.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

This section lists, defines and clarifies the important acronyms and terms used throughout this study.

Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). "A nonpartisan, nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions. CCSSO provides leadership,

advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues" (CSSO, n.d., Who We Are, para. 1).

Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA). Law passed by Congress in 1975 "to amend the Education of the Handicapped Act and provide educational assistance to all handicapped children" (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975, p. 1). Later amendments changed the name to the Individuals with Disabilities Act. For this paper, EAHCA refers to the 1975 passage of the law.

Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Law originally enacted by Congress in 1975 as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act "to ensure that children with disabilities have the opportunity to receive a free appropriate public education" (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2015, para. 1). In subsequent years, Congress reauthorized the bill as the Individuals with Disabilities Act. In 2004, Congress passed the most recent reauthorization, named the Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004). For the purposes of this paper, usage of the acronym IDEA refers to the current provisions of the law passed by Congress in the 2004 reauthorization.

Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards. "The Standards are model leadership standards that outline what education leaders should know and be able to do to ensure that all students graduating from high school are prepared to enter college or the modern workforce" (CCSSO, 2014a, p. 1).

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). A federal act amending the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the components of NCLB purport to "close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind" (NCLB, 2002, p. 1). The law also includes a number of sanctions for states, districts, and schools that do not meet targets for achievement on standardized tests for different accountability groups including students served by special education programs.

Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System (PBMAS). An automated data system that reports annually on the performance of school districts and charter schools in selected program areas including special education (Texas Education Agency, 2016).

Relationship. "The way in which two or more people or things are connected" (Merriam-Webster, n.d., Simple Definition of Relationship, para. 3). For the purposes of this paper, the two things in question are the positions of superintendent and special education director, and the working relationship is that which is examined.

Role. A behavior of the leader as perceived by subordinates with respect to the leader's basic responsibility of a particular function. For the purposes of this paper, the "leader" in question is the superintendent, the "subordinates" are the special education directors, and the "basic responsibility" is providing the special education instructional, administrative, regulatory, and/or support services for special education students.

Special education. Refers to specialized instruction designed to meet the unique needs of a child with a specific disability (Wright & Wright, 2011).

Special education department. The special education department refers to the organizational unit of a school district charged with implementing and monitoring special education programming and ensuring compliance with state and federal laws pertaining to special education. The leader of the special education department is the special education director and is usually hired/appointed by the superintendent or his designee.

Special education director. The special education director of a district can have many different titles. Boscardin, Weir, and Kusak (2010) listed examples of titles from around the United States which may include any of the following: "administrator of special education, director of special education, director of pupil personnel services or pupil special education, and director of exceptional needs" (p. 1). For the purposes of this paper, I define the special education director as the administrator assigned to oversee a school district's special education department which encompasses all the different titles listed by Boscardin, et al.

Student with a disability. A student with a disability is a student in a public school qualifying for, and receiving, special education services. Under IDEA (2004), the term refers to a child with one of 13 recognized disability types, who, by reason thereof, needs special education services and related services.

Special Education Director Supervisor. The "supervisor" refers to the person charged with overseeing and evaluating the performance of the special education director.

DELIMITATIONS

The study included five special education directors, each with at least two years of experience as a special education director with the same superintendent at a large public school district in Texas with at least 10,000 students. The number or participants was determined as per the guidelines of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Superintendents that also serve as special education directors were excluded from the study group. Special education directors fitting the criteria of the sample group were invited to participate in interviews. It is important to note that although all special education directors have similar job functions, as described by Crockett (2011), the organizational structure and culture of different school districts along with different student demographics and numbers of students create different contexts within which each director must operate. Likewise, superintendents also have similar job functions as described by Olivarez (2010), but like special education directors, they operate with the specific contexts of their school districts. These differences might influence the roles of the special education directors and superintendents in regards to special education.

This study was delimited to the perceptions of special education directors as to their working relationship with superintendents and the role of the superintendent in special education. This study did not examine the role of the supervisor or the special education director's working relationship with their supervisor. This study also did not explore performance evaluations of special education directors.

LIMITATIONS

Qualitative studies using grounded theory allow for the development of new theoretical explanations based on the data collected (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). However, qualitative studies also have weaknesses including the biases the researcher brings to the study which may affect the researcher's analysis of the data. Furthermore, the study's findings may also have been affected by the researcher's role in relation to participants. In this study, the participants were all special education directors who may have felt some trepidation discussing the role of superintendents, who are their superiors in the school district in which they work, with another administrator. Participants' answers may also have been affected by the difference in experiences between the researcher, a general education trained administrator, and the participants, who were special education trained administrators. Historical differences of opinion have been documented in the literature review in Chapter 2 of this study. Qualitative studies also use relatively small sample sizes limiting the generalizability of the study. This study employed member checks, triangulation, memos, and peer reviews to increase validity and reliability, but the results cannot be generalized to all contexts.

ASSUMPTIONS

This study purports to examine what special education directors perceive to be the role of superintendents in regards to special education. Several assumptions are inherent to the study. First, there is an assumption that special education directors know what role superintendents play, if any, in the area of special education. Second, the participants truthfully self-reported their experience level. Third, special education directors in the study have responsibility for overseeing the special education department as previously

defined. Fourth, the interviewees answered honestly and to the best of their knowledge and ability.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study contributes to the knowledge surrounding the role of superintendents in special education. Studies have been conducted regarding the perceptions of superintendents on the role of special education directors (Chaffin, 2013; Cope, 2002; Porter, 1999; Volpe, 2006), yet as Volpe (2006) points out, there is a gap in understanding the perceptions of special education directors of the role of superintendents in special education. It is anticipated that this study will support superintendents in refining their practices in the area of special education and enhance their ability to develop a strong working relationship with special education directors. Special education administrators could also benefit from the perceptions of experienced peers on the perceived roles fulfilled by superintendents and the nature of their relationship with the superintendent. In addition, this study can provide higher education preparation programs for superintendents and special education directors some insight into the responsibilities those administrators may face in the area of special education as these attempt to design more inclusive formal preparations for superintendents.

SUMMARY

Chapter 1 introduced the topic and gave background information and context to the study. It continued with a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. A brief overview of the qualitative methodology and research designs were given, followed by a list of terms and acronyms for clarifications purposes.

The chapter ended with delimitations, limitations, assumptions, and finally, an argument of the significance of the study to the needs of superintendents and the special educators they lead.

Chapter 2 presents a body of literature that addresses the historical and current role of superintendents in the area of special education, current research on the perceptions of superintendents on their role in special education, special education directors' perceptions on their role in special education, research on the relationship between superintendents and special education directors, and conclusions and analysis. Chapter 3 is an outline of the research design, selection of participants, data collection, and procedures that were used to conduct the study in order to answer the research questions posed. In Chapter 4, the findings will be explained and analyzed. The final chapter will present the findings of the study, discussion, the conclusion, and implications of the findings.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The role of superintendent is critical to the academic achievement of students with disabilities in a school district. However, that role is only one of many a superintendent must play in leading a public school district; therefore, it is imperative to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of the role of the superintendent in the area of special education. Over the past 50 years, that role has developed within the context of new unfunded federal mandates leading to new constraints on local budgets. Along with the federal mandates, a new bureaucracy of special education administrators came into being to manage special education programs for school districts. Recent studies suggest that both special education directors and superintendents perceive the role of special education directors as managing finances and ensuring legal compliance to special education laws and regulations (Chaffin, 2013; Gunnell, 2013; Jacobs, 2012; Smith, 2007; Thompson & O'Brian, 2007). However, little research has focused on what special education directors see as the role of superintendents in special education (Thompson & O'Brian, 2007; Volpe, 2006). Gaining this insight could possibly help guide superintendents in supporting special education directors in the future and provide new avenues of research.

This review of existing literature on the roles of superintendents in regards to special education is organized into the following sections: historical and legal context of the role of the superintendent in special education, perceptions of the superintendent's role in special education, special education directors' perceptions of their role in special

education, research on the relationship between superintendents and special education directors, analysis, and a summary.

HISTORICAL AND LEGAL CONTEXT OF THE ROLE OF SUPERINTENDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

The superintendent's role in special education has been shaped by the changing federal mandates involving special education. In the first half of the 20th century, students with disabilities were placed in separate schools segregated from the general population. As a result, superintendents of public schools largely handed responsibility for students with disabilities to specialized staff outside of their school districts. In the mid-1960s and early 1970s, prompted by the federal government, local school districts began enrolling students with disabilities into general public schools. Superintendents were for the first time, on a large scale, responsible for the care and education of students with a range of disabilities. With the passage of Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975, federal mandates began the integration of special education and general education programs requiring more attention from superintendents to manage both instructional and budgetary concerns. After the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002 and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004, a new layer of accountability and responsibility was added to the superintendent's role demanding a higher degree of involvement in special education.

Pre-1975: The Beginnings of Superintendent Involvement in Special Education

By 1940, nearly every state in the United States provided some form of schooling for students with disabilities including students with blindness, intellectual

disabilities, and deafness (Berry, 1941). These students were housed at schools separate from general education schools and funded and managed by states and cities since, as Willenberg (1966) reported, there were no Federal mandates, only federally funded studies suggesting what states and cities could do for students with special needs. The superintendents of public school systems were expected to merely place students with disabilities in these specialized schools and away from mainstream schools. Berry (1941) noted some exceptions in large cities, including Chicago and New York City, where the public school systems managed their own special education school system, albeit physically separated from the general education system.

By the beginning of the 1960s, public school districts saw an influx in the number of students with disabilities being enrolled in general education schools. As more and more baby boomers had children reaching school age, Willenberg (1966) suggested, the number of students with disabilities also grew, focusing the public's attention on their needs. A greater awareness of their needs fueled a new federal interest in creating some level of standardization for the education of these students culminating during the Kennedy administration when the role of the federal government in special education was formalized and special education programs were funded for the first time (Pazey & Yates, 2012). With new regulations and money to implement change, educational administrators with the specialized training to oversee programs for students with disabilities were sought by public school district leaders. These new special education administrators oversaw the movement of students with disabilities from separate facilities to general education schools. As a new special education bureaucracy grew to serve

students with disabilities in mainstream school districts, superintendents began shaping their own role in special education and the role of the special education director.

1975-2002: Evolving Role of the Superintendent

In 1975, Congress passed the EAHCA which mandated that public school systems that receive federal money "find, identify, and educationally serve children with disabilities" (Gerber, 2011, p. 12). From this point forward, public school districts were charged with the education of students with disabilities within their jurisdictions and could no longer force them to attend school in a separate facility unless the district chose to pay for it. The immediate effect on school district administration was the hiring of thousands of special education directors as evidenced by the explosion of membership in the Council of Administrators for Special Education, a national professional organization for special education administrators. Burrello and Sage (1979) reported that the numbers increased from 649 members in 1970 to 3,600 members in 1978 (as cited by Crockett, 2011). Special education departments in public school districts managed by a special education administrator were becoming the norm across the country.

At this same time, the funding of special programs took a more prominent position in the working relationship between superintendents and special education directors. As the baby boomers moved to adulthood, the number of school-aged children also declined causing a backlash by childless property tax payers who no longer wanted to sustain the same level of funding for school districts (Gerber, 2011). At the same time, the federal government failed to fully pay for the implementation of the EAHCA from the outset, passing the burden on to local districts. The new federal mandate and the

commensurate increase in personnel to support its implementation coupled with a restriction of available funding led to conflict within districts over scarce resources. Superintendents began to see special education as unfairly limiting their choices on how to spend local money (Gerber, 2011). Not surprisingly, a 1979 survey of superintendents and special education directors in North Dakota by Duncan and Hill found that both groups believed "finance", as a special education director task, to be one of the most important roles of special education directors.

Along with conflict over budgeting, superintendents also faced struggles over what the education system should look like now that special education was a part of public schools. The EAHCA attempted to create a single education system for all children managed by the superintendent, but as noted by Pazey and Yates (2012), the law resulted in the creation of "two parallel, but separate educational systems" within schools (p. 30). In 1986, the Education Department began to advocate for greater inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream general education classes. Superintendents were now charged with integrating the two systems and managing the contentiousness that ensued (Pazey & Yate, 2012). Laws passed by Congress in 1997 further required school districts and states to ensure that special education students had access to the general education curriculum and participated in statewide assessments. However, as Lashley (2007) stated, "the 1997 Amendments to the IDEA did not provide the leadership incentives and sanctions to ensure that principals would accept responsibility for the education of students who have disabilities" (p. 178).

In the 25 years since EAHCA's passage, special education slowly became the responsibility of all administrators including principals, superintendents, and special education directors. The role of superintendent has also evolved from sorting students with disabilities from the general population of students in the 1940s and 1950s, to managing a new district special education department, guiding the integration of special education within the schools, and incorporating special education funding into the local budget. With the passage of NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004), a new layer of accountability would be added.

NCLB and IDEA: Accountability's Effect on the Superintendent's Role

The accountability era reached special education in 2004 reshaping the context within which superintendents defined their role in special education. In 2002, NCLB set a goal of all children improving in reading and math achievement on standardized tests. The law also required states to publicly report the academic performance and participation results on standardized tests of students from major racial/ethnic groups, students who are economically disadvantaged, and students with limited English proficiency or English language learners. The reauthorization of IDEA (2004) made the performance of students with disabilities a reporting category within NCLB and required states to set performance goals for students with disabilities. Since that time, superintendents have had to ensure districts meet federal performance targets for students in special education programs, or they risked failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress as defined by NCLB.

The change in accountability for students with disabilities created a greater urgency for instructional leadership in special education. Crockett, Becker, and Quinn (2009) reviewed the abstracts of hundreds of education journal articles on the subject of special education since 1970. Since the year 2000, they noted a sharp increase in the percentage of articles around the topic of "accountability for student learning" over previous decades. Presumably, the increase was due to the increased accountability for student learning brought on by NCLB and IDEA. Indeed, Larson, et al. (2012) make the argument that because school districts must now publicly report the results of special education students due to the provisions of NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004), the role of superintendent must change in order to ensure all students learn. Superintendents are now held accountable to the teaching and learning of students with disabilities as measured by standardized tests.

In summary, it can be asserted that special education is a field marked by increasing federal oversight over the last fifty years. Superintendents in the 1960s oversaw the influx of special education students into mainstream general education schools prompted by new federal programs. With the passage of EAHCA (1975), superintendents were federally mandated to find and educate all students with disabilities in the public schools creating an expectation of a single educational system. The law indirectly created a new special education bureaucracy to manage its implementation in local school districts along with associated costs not completely funded by the law. NCLB (2002) and the reauthorization of IDEA (2004) brought new measures of accountability to school districts in the area of special education. Ensuring the success of

students with disabilities on state-mandated tests as a distinct group was now required, and superintendents took on the new responsibility.

From this legal and historical context, several trends emerged as to the role of the superintendent that continue to the present. First, superintendents became mangers of a special education department often managed by a special education director. Second, superintendents, through unfunded federal mandates, became the persons charged with finding the money within the local budget to fund special education services. Larson et al. (2012) reported that at the time of their publication, on average, 20-30% of district budgets went to special education while, as of the 2012–2013 school year, 13% of all students enrolled in public schools in the U.S. were identified as students with a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Third, superintendents had to oversee, or delegate to a specialized educator to oversee, the continued integration of students with disabilities into general education classes. This legal and historical context affected how superintendents perceived their own role in special education.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE SUPERINTENDENT'S ROLE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Along with the legal and historical context, other factors influenced superintendents' perceptions of their role in special education. These factors include the minimal special education coursework most superintendents had in their preparation programs, the lack of influencing leadership standards in special education, and the dearth of special education evaluation instruments to help guide the evaluations of special education directors. Combined, these factors may have helped form superintendent perceptions of their role. Included in this literature review are studies describing

superintendents' thoughts on the role of special education director. While these studies do not explore how superintendents perceive their own role in special education, they do reveal what superintendents may believe is important in special education through their views of the role of special education director.

Superintendent Preparation for Their Role in Special Education

Superintendents receive preparation for leading a school district through higher learning institutions, professional development, and their own experiences. However, some researchers have supported mandatory, formal training of general education administrators and superintendents. In a 1976 paper, Yates argued for providing training in special education to general education administrators in order to better integrate special education programs into general education settings as called for by EAHCA. Since that time, studies show the formal special education preparation for superintendents continues to be limited in scope and depth. In addition, leadership standards and evaluation instruments continue to be absent specific mention of special education. The minimal special education knowledge, increasing budgetary pressures, and legal mandates together form the context within which superintendents develop their perceptions of their role in special education.

Studies on superintendent preparation appear to indicate that superintendents are not prepared in the area of special education prior to becoming superintendents. During the 1980s in Ohio, two studies investigated superintendents' perceptions of their preparation in the area of special education. Baldwin (1986) found that in northwestern Ohio, principals and superintendents reported receiving no formal training in special

education. They entered their profession with no classwork in special education. Strong (1985) found, in a study of 102 superintendents in Ohio, many did not even know what their special education directors did and nearly a quarter of respondents delegated responsibility of survey completion to someone else.

Two studies on superintendent preparation in Illinois and South Dakota found superintendents self-reporting greater understanding in the areas of special education finance than special education programming. Volpe's (2006) survey in Illinois, cited earlier, also asked superintendents about their understanding of the provision of special education services. Volpe found "little evidence in this study to suggest that they [superintendents] were formally and adequately prepared with this information" (p. 179). Similarly, Outka (2010) conducted a survey of all 217 superintendents in South Dakota. Superintendents were given a number of areas within special education administration to self-rate their competency. The study reports superintendents' highest levels of understanding in the areas of finance and budgeting related to special education regardless of the highest degree obtained, although superintendents with doctoral degrees also reported a high understanding of how to promote mainstreaming of students with disabilities (Outka, 2010). Outka's study calls into question how well superintendents in South Dakota were prepared in terms of special education. These studies suggest that there may be some gaps in superintendent preparation programs.

The lack of special education coursework in graduate programs preparing superintendents, and other district- and campus-level administrators, may be contributing to the limited understanding of special education issues by superintendents.

Superintendents often receive formal training through an institution of higher learning prior to becoming a superintendent. Valesky and Hirth (1992) surveyed state universities across the United States. They found that 65 of the state universities that responded taught special education law as a component of their general education law class. However, they also found that 73% devoted less than 10% of that class to special education law. Since 1992, other researchers have found that universities have not increased the amount of special education offerings (Cusson, 2010; Powell, 2009; Outka, 2010; Robicheau et al., 2008; Zaretsky et al., 2005). In Cusson's (2010) study, 197 professors of educational administration at 78 institutions were asked to rank 12 critical components of educational leadership regarding the relative importance and prevalence in their research and teaching. Special education was ranked last as an area of expertise, research, required learning, and course curriculum. While those universities did offer special education classes, it is very possible that many current and former superintendents were not required to take those classes during their preparation programs. Valesky and Hirth (1992) surveyed the state directors of special education in all 50 states to find requirements for administrator certification. They found that only 3 states required superintendents to take a special education law class before receiving their endorsements. These studies indicate university superintendent preparation programs provide minimal amounts of coursework on special education, and this has not changed much since 1992.

Superintendent Guidance from Leadership Standards and Special Education Evaluation Instruments

Leadership standards set by national organizations can provide guidance for superintendents when developing their understanding of their role in special education.

Partly in response to new accountability standards and the need for new guidance to meet federal targets set by NCLB (2002), the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO, 2008a), a consortium of educational leaders from across the United States and its territories, updated the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards for School Leaders. Incredibly, the document makes no mention of special education programs. On the other hand, a companion document, Performance Expectations and Indicators for Educational Leaders, also produced by the CCSSO (2008b), explicitly states the responsibility of school administrators to provide for the education of students with disabilities. One can only speculate why the CCSSO includes students with disabilities, an important accountability group under NCLB, in the performance indicators, but not in the standards themselves.

More recently, the CCSSO (2014a) released a draft of their updated 2014 Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards. In that draft, under Standard 10: Equity and Cultural Responsiveness, the CCSSO states one of the functions of school leaders as, "Attacks issues of student marginalization; deficit-based schooling; and limiting assumptions about gender, race, class, and *special status* [emphasis added]" (2014a, p. 20). Again, the CCSSO fails to mention special education directly, failing to directly link federal accountability standards to educational leadership standards. One result is that school districts and individual campuses are held accountable to the performance of students with disabilities on standardized tests, but these educational leaders are not always evaluated on the performance of their special education programs.

Superintendents who have little experience in special education might turn to special education evaluation instruments to help guide them in developing their perception of their role in special education. However, special education directors are often evaluated by superintendents using instruments without specific special education criteria. Burrello and Zadnik (1986) surveyed 250 special education directors nation-wide then interviewed 14 effective special education directors to compare each group's thoughts on what they called Critical Success Factors. They identified a number of Critical Success Factors associated with effective special education directors that could be used to develop standards and performance assessment tools. Five years after Burrello and Zadnik's work, Lashley (1991) found evaluations of special education directors were still lacking specific special education related content or indicators and were mostly the same as used for other central office administrators. Lashley proposed a possible assessment instrument specific to special education directors. Seven years later, Johnson (1998) again called for evaluation tools specific to the role of special education director noting that such a tool was lacking in most school districts. Johnson also proposed an evaluation system specific to special education. Smith (2007), in her review of special education director evaluation tools, concluded that evaluation tools still needed to be revised to fit the needs of special education directors and in response to new federal accountability measures. Modifications in laws, the creation of new standards, and multiple calls for new systems of evaluation for special education directors have changed little since Burrello and Zadnik's proposal in 1986.

What currently exists is a generic administrator evaluation not suited to the task of evaluating the performance of special education directors or giving superintendents

guidance on their role in overseeing a special education department. Smith (2007) found that in Virginia, 83% of special education directors reported they were evaluated using the same system as other central office administrators with no content related specifically to special education—a similar finding to what Lashley (1991) found 16 years earlier. Illustrating what Smith and Lashley reported, the Illinois State Board of Education posted a presentation authored by Hacket and Thomas (2012) giving guidance to those evaluating special education directors. It stated, "The evaluation of special education administrators is more similar to the evaluation of all administrators than it is different" (Hacket & Thomas, 2012, p. 3). The authors go on to suggest using Illinois' general education administration rubric—the Illinois Performance Standards for School Leaders—as a tool for evaluating the performance of special education directors.

With minimal coursework, a lack of leadership standards specific to special education, and almost no evaluation systems specific to special education to guide them, superintendents have developed their perceptions of their role and the role of special education directors. Their perceptions, along with those of several authorities on the topic, are explored in the next section.

Superintendent's Role in Special Education

Establishing, through the existing literature, what superintendents perceive as important to their work and the work of special education directors sets the context within which special education directors develop their own perceptions. While only one study was found reporting superintendents' self-perceptions of their role in special education,

several authors provide guidance on that role. In addition, there are several that reveal superintendents' thoughts on the job functions of the special education director.

One study on superintendents' self-perceptions of their role in special education found superintendents fixated on finance, funding, and laws and regulations in relation to their role in special education (Volpe, 2006). The study surveyed 241 superintendents in Illinois asking their level of agreement to the question of whether various administrative responsibilities in special education were important to their jobs. Participants' answers indicated a strong agreement to the statement that "knowledge of school finance and budget procedures" was important to their jobs in the area of special education. The second highest rating was "state and federal funding sources," and the third was "knowledge of laws and regulations". In the same study by Volpe, superintendents rated their overall preparation for working with special education as "relatively high" because they felt confident in dealing with financial and regulatory issues related to special education.

Other studies have highlighted the superintendents' perspectives by asking about their views on the role of special education directors. By examining the results of these studies, one can extrapolate what superintendents see as their role in special education. In one of the earlier studies, Duncan and Hill (1979) surveyed 30 superintendents and 22 special education directors in North Dakota. They asked each participant to rank the importance of seven tasks of the special education director. Superintendents ranked "Personnel" first and "Finances" third. More recent studies, reviewed in the following

paragraphs, indicate an evolution in the thinking of superintendents towards budgets and legal compliance.

In a study in Washington state, Chaffin (2013) interviewed eight superintendents and assistant superintendents who had hired a special education director in the previous two years. The superintendents came from eight different districts that ranged in size from 1,000 students to over 10,000 students. Chaffin asked them what competencies, skills, and knowledge they sought when hiring a special education director and how they identified those during the hiring process. As stated by Chaffin, "Compliance monitoring and budget management" (2013, p. 44) were the most highly sought competencies.

Cope (2002) surveyed administrators in every school district in Texas about special education director competencies. Two hundred seventy-six superintendents and assistant superintendents, representing both the largest and smallest districts in Texas, responded rating the level of importance of 51 job competencies. Competencies rated the highest by the superintendents and assistant superintendents reflected their concerns for compliance with regulations and budgetary matters (Cope, 2002). Similarly, a previous study conducted by Porter (1999) in West Virginia surveyed superintendents asking them to specify what they found important in the role of special education director, budgeting stood out as an area of great importance to superintendents.

Other authors described the superintendent's role as limited but vital in special education. Larson, Levine, Vita, and Young (2012), a group of former superintendents writing in a policy manual for superintendents, described the role as "analyzing achievement data, monitoring staffing costs, embracing the philosophy and practice of

inclusive education, and fostering a culture of collaboration to achieve a collective sense of accountability between general and special education" (p. 2). It is their argument that superintendents who engage in these activities can and will positively impact the education of students with disabilities. They even went so far as to link the overall success of a school district with how well the superintendent fulfills this role. Likewise, Edwards and Vita (2012), also former superintendents, emphasized the need for collaboration between the superintendent and the special education director to ensure the achievement of students with a disability. They suggest that the key to effective special education programs "is the clarity of expectations for performance based on collaboration and effective use of data for decision making" by special education directors and their superintendents (p. 14). Collaboration, use of data, accountability, and financial management are all tasks these authors claim are part of the role of superintendent.

While describing the role of the superintendent, Larson, et al. (2012) and Edwards and Vita (2012) also noted limitations to the role of the superintendent in special education. Larson, et al. (2012) warned superintendents against micromanaging special education operations; rather, they should effectively communicate their expectations and beliefs to their special education staff and allow them to operate the programs. Edwards and Vita (2012) pointed out the numerous demands of a superintendent beyond special education. They emphasized the need to hire a quality person as special education director to manage programs while the superintendent ensures collaboration amongst special education and general education staff and accountability. While these two groups of practitioners detailed the job functions of a superintendent in regards to special education, others focused on knowledge and ethics.

One researcher who studied the competencies needed by administrators in the area of special education was Cusson (2010). Rather than listing job functions, Cusson created a list of areas of competency all administrators, including superintendents, should know in relation to students with disabilities. She used 17 empirical studies to create a list of 12 competencies in which relationships appear to figure most prominently in her analysis. Those competencies include:

> (a) relationship and communication; (b) leadership and vision; (c) budget and capital; (d) special education law and policies; (e) curriculum and instruction; (f) personnel; (g) evaluation of data, programs, students, and teachers; (h) collaboration and consultation; (i) special education programming; (j) organization; (k) professional development; and (l) advocacy. (Cusson, 2010, p. viii)

There are similarities between Cusson's list of competencies and the tasks Larson et al. and Edwards and Vita described, including communication, budget, evaluation of data, and collaboration. However, Cusson's list is far broader and involves a much greater base of knowledge.

Another view of the role of the superintendent focused on ensuring the equity of education for students with disabilities. Pazey and Cole (2013), citing Cusson (2010) among others, indicated that knowledge of special education issues allow administrators to further the cause of equity for students with disabilities, and that without an adequate knowledge base, superintendents and principals cannot fully appreciate or support the needs of students with disabilities or the special educators that teach them. They explain that principals and superintendents must have a minimum amount of knowledge about special education in order to actively pursue a policy that integrates special education and

general education. The views of Larson, et al., Edwards and Vita, et al., Cusson, and Pazey and Cole are in contrast to the perception of superintendents about their role in special education garnered by Volpe's (2006) study and those on superintendents' perceptions of the role of special education directors.

Since 1975, federal mandates have placed new responsibilities on superintendents in the area of special education. With these responsibilities have come the pressures of budgeting and ensuring compliance with the law. In the last ten years, formal accountability measures have been enacted adding to the urgency of superintendents taking a more active role in special education. With little guidance from their preparation coursework or leadership standards or evaluation instruments, it appears superintendents have provided guidance in the areas that historically have caused them concern in special education: budgeting and legal compliance. These two areas also are viewed by superintendents as two important functions, if not the most important functions, of the special education director revealing an overlap between the perceived roles of superintendents and special education directors despite the more expanded role advocated by some authors. The effect of such views on special education directors and their role in special education is evident in the literature as they also appear to concentrate on budgeting and legal compliance.

SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Special education directors have general responsibility for overseeing the special education department of a school district. According to recent research, special education

directors perform several functions and specific actions. For instance, Crockett (2011) described their responsibilities as follows:

> Special education administrators serve as advocates for students with disabilities from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and ensure compliance with policies that protect students' rights and ensure their educational benefits. Special education administrators also provide leadership fostering the use of effective instructional practices and assistive technology for diverse learners, and cultivating productive relationships within the school systems and across external agencies. Solving problems, making data-based decisions, and collaborating with other in the management of multi-million dollar budgets are also part of the responsibilities. (p. 351)

Special education directors' specific roles are shaped, in part, by the demographics of the school district within which they work as well as the specific directions given by the superintendent. Studies on the role of special education director have created contrasting images. On the one hand, there are studies indicating that special education directors largely agree with superintendents that the role of the special education director is to manage the budget and ensure regulatory compliance above all else (Chaffin, 2013; Cope, 2002; Gunnell, 2013; Smith, 2007; Torgerson, 1997). There are some smaller studies, however, that describe the special education director as an instructional leader positively impacting the education of students with disabilities as well as managing budgets and legal compliance (Huberman, Navo, & Parrish, 2012; Thompson & O'Brian, 2007; Toson, Burrello, & Knollman, 2012).

Special Education Directors' Focus on Budgeting and Legal Compliance

Several studies have documented the perceptions of special education directors that two of their most important job functions are budgeting and legal compliance. For instance, Torgerson (1997) surveyed and interviewed 105 special and general education

leaders including 7 superintendents in the Central Valley of California. She found general agreement, amongst those surveyed and interviewed, that legal compliance is a major responsibility in their leadership. Similarly, in a study of 30 special education directors in Virginia, Smith (2007) investigated the alignment of state standards used to evaluate special education directors, to those standards perceived as very important to those same directors. Smith found that over 90% listed "Laws and Policies" and "Budgeting" as areas of great importance to their job. By contrast, 38% listed "Development and Characteristics of Learners" as being very important.

Six years later, Gunnell (2013) asked 140 special education directors in Illinois to rate the importance of Illinois Standards for Special Education Directors to their work. As a whole, those directors rated special education finance as the most important standard. Similarly, Isaac (2014) surveyed 152 Texas special education directors on what they felt was most important to their jobs. Knowledge of federal policy and budget received the highest percentages of the rating "Essential", more than any other areas. Clearly, special education directors have budgets and legal compliance on their minds above areas related to instructional leadership.

Other studies have found special education directors feel unprepared in the areas of budgeting and legal compliance. In Arick and Krug's (1993) national study, special education directors were asked to rank lists of professional development needs. On the list of general administration items, budgeting placed fourth out of eleven items, and on the special education list, law requirements ranked ten out of seventeen. Fifteen years later, Thompson and O'Brian (2007) surveyed 67 directors, about half men and half

women, across the state of Illinois serving in various school district sizes and from urban, suburban, and rural districts. The two top areas in which directors felt they needed more information were financial issues and special education law. When asked to name areas causing them the most difficulties, special education directors cited special education law and budgeting. Cope's (2002) study of superintendents, cited earlier, also surveyed 118 special education directors from across Texas to rate their level of preparedness in relation to the same 51 competencies as the superintendents. Special education directors rated regulations and budgetary matters as areas in which they, as special education directors, felt less prepared when entering their current positions (Cope, 2002). This brings up the possibility that superintendents were hiring special education directors that were unprepared in the very areas for which superintendents find are most important.

At least one qualitative study supports the assertion that special education directors are not being hired for the skills and knowledge superintendents state they value. Chaffin studied the actual hiring practices of eight superintendents. She found that the actual interview questions of special education directors were more often geared towards "leadership style than knowledge of special education law" (2013, p. 129), the opposite of what superintendents reported as most important in hiring. In the end, Chaffin surmised that superintendents hired special education directors based on interpersonal skills and leadership style rather than for any of the skills superintendents reported as being important. This finding suggests that superintendents hire directors for their management style, and then hold them accountable to finances and regulations more than anything else.

Special Education Directors and Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is the practice of educational leaders to ensure students receive high quality instruction at school (Center for Educational Leadership, 2015). While the studies discussed previously focused on special education directors' responsibilities in the area of legal compliance and budgeting, other studies support a much more expanded role with instructional leadership being much more prominent.

One study found that the emphasis on finances and legal compliance came at the expense of instructional leadership as perceived by special education directors. Thompson and O'Brian's (2007) study in Illinois found that special education directors consider finance and law as very important to their jobs, but insufficient to being successful. Instead, their study found directors believed leadership of instructional programming as more vital to the success of special education administrators. Other authors also support the perception of special education directors that instructional leadership is an important dimension of their job (Boscardin, 2007; Lashley, 1991).

In addition, there are examples of special education directors leading in other areas besides budgeting and legal compliance. In one multiple case study, Toson, Burrello, and Knollman (2012) selected five special education directors who had great success increasing the percentage of students with disabilities educated in general education classrooms in their school districts. In their interviews, the researchers sought to determine whether the directors focused more on students' capability to learn than on other factors, a philosophy of special education they called the capabilities approach. They found that students with disabilities in districts led by leaders with a philosophy

more aligned to the capabilities approach had greater "social affiliation, community membership, and improved student outcomes" than students whose leaders were absorbed by regulatory compliance (Toson, et al., p. 16).

Findings, from a research study examining four districts in California, also exemplify that the achievement of students with disabilities can be accelerated because of the instructional leadership of the special education director. Huberman, Navo, and Parrish (2012) reviewed special education data for school districts in California over a four-year period. They identified a group of school districts whose students receiving special education services were outperforming similar districts within the state. From that group of districts, they identified four districts that exemplified internal processes they believed led to higher performance of special education students. Huberman et al. (2012) found five main themes across these districts that were consistent with the literature on effective practices for students in special education: inclusion and access to the core curriculum, collaboration between special education and general education teachers, continuous assessment and use of Response to Intervention, targeted professional development, and the use of specific direct instruction. In their study, Huberman et al. interviewed the special education directors of each of the four districts. In each instance, the director was able to articulate the processes and initiatives that led to the improvement of special education students on state achievement tests. These two studies show at least some special education directors dedicated to instructional leadership.

RESEARCH ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUPERINTENDENTS AND SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTORS

In the literature review, one study was found that explored the relationship between superintendents and special education directors. Jacobs (2012) conducted a study in California surveying 27 directors and 21 superintendents and interviewing five from each group. From the study, Jacobs found that both superintendents and directors felt it was important to ensure that superintendents were informed about changes in special education law or policy, litigation, and funding changes and that the two groups communicate and collaborate to ensure a positive working relationships. Jacobs delved further during interviews to determine what might be barriers to a strong working relationship. During those interviews, superintendents reported a "lack of knowledge of the role of the SELPA [Special Education Local Plan Area] Director, lack of understanding of special education issues and laws as barriers" to working effectively with their directors (Jacobs, 2012, p. 65). Open-ended responses on the survey and interviews also revealed that directors and superintendents were not clear on the role each other plays in special education although both groups found communication skills to be very important to their working relationship. This finding suggests that although special education directors and superintendents know that communication and collaboration are important, possibly because they do not understand each other's role, they tend to base their relationship on budgets and legal compliance since that is an area of common understanding. On the survey, both groups gave the statements related to instruction of students with disabilities the lowest average rating in terms of their importance to the superintendent-special education director relationship.

ANALYSIS

Superintendents and special education directors both have a role to play in special education, and where to draw the line between one and the other is an important question. Answering that question correctly could point to improved education outcomes for students with disabilities. As some authors suggest, superintendents should not micromanage the operation, programs, and services in special education (Larson et al, 2012), but nor should they withdraw fully from special education and create or perpetuate dual systems of education decried by Lashley (2007). The proper role of superintendents in special education is somewhere in between.

A review of current literature shows most superintendents view their role in special education as overseeing budgeting and legal compliance. This appears to be the case for several reasons. First, historically, the role of superintendent in special education has been driven, not by greater preparation and understanding, but by legal mandates from government. Yates (1976) predicted the need for greater preparation of general education administrator in special education shortly after the passage of EAHCA, and Cusson (2010) shows how very little the preparation of superintendents in special education has increased in 35 years. Taken with lack of interest in special education specific leadership standards and evaluation instruments, superintendents are left to decide on their role in special education with little guidance. Within this void, superintendents struggled to promote special education reforms until the law required those reforms; hence, it is no wonder superintendents are attuned to the legalities of special education.

Second, from the signing of the EAHCA into law, special education has never been fully funded by the federal governments. Several authors have cited the difficulties in budgeting superintendents must navigate between implementing special education programs and providing for general education programs within the local district's budget (Crockett, 2011; Gerber, 2011; Larson, et al., 2012; Pazey & Yates, 2012). With such a large portion of the budget tied to special education, superintendents are naturally drawn to the topic.

What is problematic about the superintendents' main interests is that special education directors also fall in line with what superintendents demand—budget and legal compliance. Some studies have shown that directors believe budgeting and legal compliance are their two main job functions (Cope, 2002; Gunnell, 2013; Isaac, 2014; Smith, 2007; Torgerson, 1997) which then appear to overshadow and preclude other job functions directors also believe are vital such as instructional leadership (Boscardin, 2007; Lashley, 1991). Two studies (Thompson & O'Brian, 2007; Toson, et al., 2012) actually linked the focus on legal compliance and finances by superintendents to a decrease in special education directors' ability to improve the instruction for students with disabilities. Many superintendents may have become too interested in too narrow a part of the special education leadership.

If the role of superintendent is not to micromanage, but ought to be more than chief of compliance and budgeting for special education, research must be conducted to discern the scope of duties encompassed by the superintendent in regards to special education. Volpe (2006) suggests exactly this in his study on the perceptions of

superintendents on their role in special education. He calls for a study to determine the perceptions of special education directors on the role and responsibilities of the superintendent in special education. His call is echoed by Thompson and O'Brian (2007) who stated their belief that the perceptions of special education directors are essential to understanding leadership in special education. While much research has addressed superintendents' and special education directors' perceptions on the role of special education director, research related to the role of the superintendent in special education is limited.

While most research on the roles of superintendents and special education directors has primarily used surveys, it lacks a rich description of the role of the superintendents from the point-of-view of the special education director. Such knowledge and information could be expanded by in-depth exploration of the underlying reasons for the views associated with the role and expectations of special education directors. Thus, adding knowledge to the area of educational administration by examining special education directors' perceptions of the role of the superintendent in the area of special education through qualitative methods may expand our understanding of how superintendents can best serve the needs of students with disabilities.

SUMMARY

Chapter 2 offered a review of the existing literature on the roles of superintendents in regards to special education. The chapter began with the historical and legal context in which the role of superintendent began in special education. Major points include the effect of growing federal interest in special education in the 1960s, the

passage of the EAHCA, increasing budget pressures for local districts, tension caused by integrating special and general education, and accountability for special education in the form of new provisions in NCLB and IDEA. After a review of the minimal guidance superintendents have from coursework, standards, and evaluation instruments, the chapter reviewed literature on the perceptions of superintendents on their role in special education through studies on superintendent perceptions of both their role and the role of special education director. These studies support the notion that superintendents view financing and ensuring compliance with the law as their two most important roles to play in special education.

Next, the perceptions of special education directors give a view into how the superintendent's role may have shaped the job functions of special education directors. The majority of these studies conclude special education directors also concentrate on budgeting and legal compliance just as their superintendents do. It also appears that superintendents might be driving the focus of special education directors.

In addition, studies on the relationship of superintendents and special education directors were reviewed. Two groups of practitioners provide arguments for the vital, but limited role of superintendents in special education, while other researchers support increased levels of formal training in the area of special education which could enable superintendents to provide a more equitable education for students with disabilities. Some studies suggest that when special education directors address more aspects of their job, students with disabilities have more positive academic outcomes as measured by state tests. In addition, one qualitative study (Jacobs, 2012) examining the working

relationship of superintendents and special education directors supports other research that both superintendents and special education directors focus on budget and compliance, but with one extra caveat. Neither group appears to understand the role of the other in regards to special education.

Chapter 3 will review the study's methodology. It features a review of the methodology and design, a description of the population and sample, and a review of data collection instruments. The chapter ends with the data collection and analysis procedures used.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Previous research suggests that superintendents believe budgeting and legal compliance to be two important roles superintendents and special education directors have in the field of special education, but the literature has not established the perceptions of special education directors of the roles of superintendents. Chapter 3 includes the research method, the descriptions of the population and sample, the data collection instruments, researcher preparation, positionality, and bias, data collection procedures, and data analysis.

Because of the apparent concentration of superintendents in only two areas of special education, it is important to highlight the perceptions of special education directors in order to possibly broaden their perspective of their role. The purpose of this study was to determine special education directors' perceptions about the role of the superintendent in the area of special education and examine the working relationship between the special education directors and superintendents. Through unstructured interviews of special education directors, the researcher aimed to elicit their perspectives on the roles of superintendents and the nature of their working relationship with superintendents as suggested by Volpe (2006) and Thompson and O'Brian (2007).

In order to address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What do special education directors perceive to be the role of the superintendent in special education?

2. What are special education directors' perceptions about their relationship with the superintendent?

RESEARCH METHOD

This was an exploratory qualitative research study using grounded theory. There were several reasons for using qualitative methods and grounded theory. First, the researcher claimed a constructivist paradigm believing that meaning is made through collective human interaction (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). As such, qualitative methods fit the researcher's paradigm. In addition, Patton (2002) noted that certain types of research questions lend themselves exclusively to qualitative methods such as those chosen for this study exploring perceptions.

Second, the literature review established the limited use of qualitative methods in studies on the roles of both general and special education administrators in the area special education. Several studies involving surveys were conducted on superintendents' perspectives on their own role and the role of special education directors (Cope, 2002; Outka, 2010; Porter, 1999; Strong, 1985; Volpe, 2006) as well as several surveys on the perspectives of special education directors on their own roles in special education (Gunnel, 2013; Isaac, 2014; Smith, 2007; Strong 1985; Thompson & O'Brian, 2007; Torgerson, 1997). While some of those same studies used mixed methods and employed interviews as well as surveys (Cope, 2002; Jacobs, 2012; Smith, 2007; Torgerson, 1997) and two used exclusively qualitative approaches (Chaffin, 2013; Toson, et al., 2012), none used qualitative methods to explore the perceptions of its participants on the roles general and special education administrators play in special education save two (Jacobs,

2012; Toson, et al., 2012). Furthermore, no study targeted the proposed research questions using either qualitative or quantitative methods, another reason to use qualitative methods supported by Corbin and Strauss (2015).

Third, this study purported to examine the perceptions of special education directors. Discussing their perceptions involved participants speaking about how the meaning of the leadership role of superintendents has formed in their mind and whether such perceptions affect the actual performance of special education directors. Corbin and Strauss (2005) support the use of qualitative methods "to explore how meanings are formed and transformed" and "to explore the inner experiences of participants" (p. 5). Since the researcher elicited a description of the thoughts of participants, qualitative methods were a valid methodology.

Qualitative methods have certain inherent strengths as compared to other methods as explained by Bogdan and Bilken (2007). First, qualitative methods are descriptive, using the richness of the data to illustrate emerging themes. Second, these methods are concerned with process rather than just outcomes. This allows the researcher to understand why a certain outcome came about. Third, meaning is derived from the participants of the study rather than the researcher. On the other hand, qualitative methods also have some inherent weaknesses. These include the limited generalizability of the findings given the relatively small potential sample size and the possibility of researcher bias intruding on the data gathering and analysis. These weaknesses were mitigated by qualitative research techniques including field notes and memos, member checking, and triangulation as suggested by Hays and Singh (2012).

This study was an exploratory qualitative research study using grounded theory. Grounded theory attempts to build theory from the data analysis rather than using a theoretical framework (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Since no qualitative studies have been conducted on the current topic, there are no frameworks that have been used in the field for this particular purpose. Also, special education directors have their own perception of the superintendent's role that has yet to be illuminated by research. Grounded theory allows the exploration of the beliefs, emotions, and logic that drive persons to make particular decisions (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In this study, it was important to delve into questions surrounding the relationship between superintendents and special education directors. Finally, literature has established that superintendents and special education directors perseverate on the financial and legal aspects of their roles in special education. Rather than beginning with the notion that the role of superintendent has already been established, grounded theory allowed the researcher to explore the problem from many different angles before attempting to advance concepts and theories emerging from the findings.

DESCRIPTIONS OF THE POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The study used purposive sampling to select special education directors in Texas for the interviews using a set of pre-determined criteria (Hayes & Singh, 2012). The first criterion was that the special education director has served in that position with the same superintendent for at least two years. This helped ensure the participant was familiar with the role of the superintendent in special education and also familiar with their own role as special education director. Second, only special education directors from Texas public school districts with a student population greater than 9,999 students were

considered in order to exclude variability from charter school districts that might educate a dissimilar population of students from public schools and eliminate smaller districts where special education directors are more likely to have duties beyond that of managing special education programs. The size of the school districts was determined using publicly available information from the Texas Education Agency website.

The first special education director was initially selected through a referral from a coordinator of special education at the Texas Region XIII Service Center. The coordinator is the organizer of the Special Education Leadership Network which consists of special education directors from Texas. The coordinator, having met with members of the Special Educator Leadership Network on numerous occasions, was able to refer the researcher to a special education director meeting the sample criteria and also whom the coordinator felt was most knowledgeable and willing to speak on the research topic. Other participants were recruited through email solicitations after receiving a referral from another educator.

For this grounded theory study, five special education directors were selected. Corbin and Strauss (2015) stated, "a researcher continues to gather data until reaching the level of data 'saturation'" (p. 139). They explained that saturation occurs when no new concepts emerge from the data. For this reason, the selection of five participants was only a beginning number and could expand to new rounds of interviews. After each interview, data analysis began and led to concepts requiring new interviews to test emerging themes and concepts. For these new interviews, snowball sampling was used to include new participants meeting the criteria for the sample population. Since this was

an exploratory research study, the number of concepts saturated may be limited by the amount of time and resources available. Hays and Singh (2012) support the use of exploratory research using grounded theory when the purpose is to find a generalized concept to start future research. Since the perceptions of special education directors have not been explored through qualitative research methods before, a pilot study was warranted. After institutional review board approval, the researcher interviewed a retired special education supervisor to improve the interview guide. While grounded theory was the theoretical approach best suited for exploring the research questions, this study only opened the door for further studies.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

For the purposes of this study, unstructured interviews and document reviews were used. Theory sampling was used in the collection of data. Corbin and Strauss (2015) define theory sampling as:

> A method of data collection based on concepts derived from data. The purpose of theoretical sampling is to collect data from places, people, and events that will maximize opportunities to develop concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions, uncover variations, and identify relationships between concepts. (p. 134)

In grounded theory, data collection is flexible and allows the researcher to adjust data collection to better test developing theories. As data was collected from interviews and documents, the researcher began analyzing and identifying concepts. Depending on what may best serve to inform the researcher on the emerging concepts, the researcher adjusted the interview guides and chose new questions and reviewed the documents to better inform the emerging concepts.

Unstructured interviews were important to gaining and understanding of the perceptions of participants. Interviews allow researchers to probe topics and learn what is meaningful to the participant (Hays and Singh, 2012). Understanding the perceptions of special education directors on the role of special education necessitates an opportunity for the participants to speak fully on those topics. Corbin and Strauss (2015) recommend the use of unstructured interviews in grounded theory because they "provide the richest source of data for theory building" (p. 38). When asking special education directors about the role of superintendents in special education, the interviewees must feel free to cover topics they feel comfortable about and that are meaningful to their experiences.

An interview guide was developed to ensure the main topics were covered and to help begin the conversation. Corbin and Strauss (2015) recommended that the interview guides be "flexible enough to follow through and add new concepts" (p. 373), so as interviews are conducted, the protocol and topics covered evolve as the researcher develops potential theories and begins to test them in future interviews. Furthermore, although an interview guide was used, participants were free to cover any topics they chose. If topics were sensitive and not covered in the original interview guide, participants were reminded that the data might be used, but their anonymity would be protected.

The open-ended interview guide consisted of four parts. The first two parts included demographic information, background, and organizational structure of the school district, which were essential to develop a profile of each participant, and self-perceptions associated with the role of special education directors. The research

questions were addressed in the last two parts of the interview guide including perceptions of the role of the superintendent and their working relationship with the special education director.

A review of public documents related to special education within the school district where the special education director worked was also performed. The use of documents in qualitative research provides supplemental information which can be interpreted as the "official" statements of an organization (Bodgan & Bilken, 2007). The types of documents reviewed included district organizational charts, school district improvement plans, and school district web pages, as well as Texas Academic Performance Reports. These documents helped build context about the role of the superintendent in special education by revealing publicly stated goals related to special education, updates about progress of the school districts towards those goals, and relationships between various leadership positions within the district.

RESEARCHER PREPARATION, POSITIONALITY, AND BIAS

The researcher was trained and prepared to conduct qualitative studies using these methods. The researcher studied qualitative methods and systems of human inquiry as well as special education at the doctoral level. In addition, the researcher spent 11 years as a general education administrator in a public school district.

The researcher claimed a constructivist paradigm and used this paradigm in the analysis of data. The researcher was a doctoral student in a superintendency program as well as a practicing principal in a middle school. Given the possibility of research bias, the researcher employed strategies for reducing biases including journaling and grounded

theory methodology. Journaling allowed the researcher to be aware of his reactions during interviews and while analyzing data. During interviews, taking notes allowed the researcher to note where his reactions may have influenced the participants' answers. During analysis, these interview notes were points of reflection to avoid quick conclusions. Grounded theory uses methods that have built-in checks and balances (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The researcher used constant comparisons of data to search for similarities, differences, and consistency.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

After the study was approved by the dissertation committee, a request for approval from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Texas at Austin was submitted. Included in the proposal was a request for approval to interview adult participants and a sample copy of the interview protocol. Once approval was received, the researcher used the interview protocol in a pilot test with a non-member of the sample population. The purpose of the pilot test was to ensure the validity and reliability of the interview guide. After adjustments were made to the interview guide, the researcher began interviewing the sample population.

Initial identification of potential participants was done through referrals from the special education coordinator at the Region XIII Service Center in Austin, Texas. The researcher contacted them by phone or email and invited them to be a part of the interview. A follow up email contained consent information from the Institutional Review Board along with an explanatory letter about the purpose of the study. Data analysis was performed after each interview, and if more participants were needed after

the first round of interviews, the directory of the Special Educator Leadership Network, publicly available on the Region XIII website, was used to find contact information. When that list became exhausted, school district websites and referrals were used to find special education directors meeting the sample criteria.

Interviews were set at a time and place of the participant's choosing in order to maximize their comfort. Paper copies of the consent form from the Institutional Review Board and the explanatory letter about the purpose of the study with the researchers contact information were provided at the interview. Prior to the start of the interview, a brief verbal introduction of the researcher and the study were made to increase the participant's comfort level, and signed consent was obtained prior to beginning the interview. The researcher introduced the topics to be covered and allowed the participant to talk and relate any information the participant felt was relevant with only minimal prompting by the researcher. As Corbin and Strauss (2015) recommend, the researcher was self-aware of any mannerisms or facial expressions that could have encouraged or discouraged the participant from moving down particular lines of discussion. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour depending on the amount of time participants wished to spend speaking on the subject. At the end of the interview, participants were given an opportunity to make any final or last comments. Interviewees were then asked whether they would like a final version of the dissertation once it is complete, and they provided their preferred contact information.

All interviews were recorded with the permission of the participant and any transcriptions of the interviews were made through a transcribing service. The transcripts

were sent to participants for review in order to complete member checks, and they were invited to make clarifications, additions, or corrections. At any time, if the participant wished, the recording was stopped and hand written-notes were taken instead. Successive rounds of interviews or follow-up interviews were determined through data analysis using theory sampling.

DATA ANALYSIS

The researcher used open coding to identify concepts in data after each interview. It is important to note that in using grounded theory, data analysis began after each interview and helped inform the researcher prior to the next interview (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). For each interview the following procedures were used. Immediately after the interview, the researcher wrote brief thoughts regarding the interview to capture the researcher's initial impressions including thoughts on the participant's body language and points of emphasis that cannot be captured through a transcription of the interview. After receiving the transcription of the interview, the researcher listened to the recording while reading the transcript and wrote a memo reflecting the thinking of the researcher on the interview as a whole. Next, the researcher reviewed the transcript line by line grouping statements together into codes based on the perceived meaning of the participant's statements. At the end of the analysis of the interview, the list of codes was examined along with the initial impressions and the memo covering the researcher's reflections on the interview as a whole. The purpose was to look for consistencies or contradictions.

The researcher then reviewed documents related to the participant's school district for information that could confirm, validate, or contradict statements made by the

participants. Using the list of codes and the data gained from the document review, the researcher adjusted the interview guide, if necessary, to ensure new concepts were explored with the new participants. As more interviews were conducted, the researcher sought to identify themes and finally develop working theories. Finally, the researcher used current literature to advance a theory regarding the perceptions of special education directors.

In analyzing the data, the researcher used the following qualitative analysis strategies: questioning, constant comparisons, use of personal life experiences, and looking for negative cases. Questioning data enables the researcher to "probe, develop provisional answers, think outside the box, become acquainted with data" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, pp. 90–91). In constant comparisons, the researcher takes a piece of datum and compares it to another to determine whether they are conceptually the same or different. In developing codes from different participants and documents, constant comparisons improved the validity of the codes. The researcher was a practicing administrator in a public school district with personal experience working with special education directors. Corbin and Strauss (2015) suggest using personal experience as a way of offering new ways of thinking of the data or finding a negative case to challenge assumptions. Finding negative cases in the data is looking for a case that does not fit the pattern the researcher has identified in the codes. Although a negative case might not be found, Corbin and Strauss believe that the search can help researchers find alternative explanations from the theory being developed.

In order to enhance the validity and reliability of the data analysis, the researcher employed triangulation, member checks, memos, and peer review. Triangulation is the use of multiple forms of evidence to support the findings. This study used multiple sources including interview participants and documents. Member checks were employed to ensure that participants' thoughts were accurately captured in interview transcriptions. To this end, all participant interview transcripts were sent to participants for review. Hays and Singh (2012) note that memos are records researchers use about specific data collection methods and help remind the researcher how and why key decisions in the researcher process were made. The researcher wrote memos related to each interview. Finally, initial codes developed from transcripts were verified by having another doctoral student code the transcripts. The researcher looked for discrepancies in the coding and adjusted as necessary.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine special education directors' perceptions about the role of the superintendent in the area of special education and the relationship between special education directors and superintendents. The following research questions were examined:

1. What do special education directors perceive to be the role of the superintendent in special education?

2. What are special education directors' perceptions about their working relationship with the superintendent?

This chapter is divided into three major sections: description of the participants, including demographics and self-perceptions of their own role, the role of the superintendent in special education, and special education directors' working relationship with the superintendent. The chapter concludes with a summary and a brief preview of chapter five.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

This section describes background information on the participants and their current school districts as well as information on how each individual became a special education director. This information provides the context in which the five participants have developed their perceptions. In addition, participants were asked to provide their self-perceptions of their role as special education directors. Their self-perceptions

provide an opportunity for comparison between the perceived role of the special education director and the perceived role of the superintendent in special education.

Since there is only one special education director in public school districts in Texas, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant and school district to protect participants' anonymity. In addition, some other possibly identifying details about the participants and school districts are either disguised or omitted throughout the study. In some cases, parts of quotes have been omitted to protect participants' identities as indicated by brackets or blanks.

Participant Demographics, Experience, and Background

All five participants are current special education directors in public school districts with over 10,000 students in the state of Texas. They collectively have worked as special education administrators or directors in fifteen different school districts of over 10,000 students with three participants either working or having worked in a major urban district. Table 1 matches each participant with their current school district name and type along with the number of special education administration jobs they have held. The experiences of participants in multiple large districts allowed the participants to make comparisons and generalizations about the role of the superintendent and special education director and their working relationship beyond just their current position.

Table 1: Participant Districts

Name	**Current District**	**Type of District**	**Number of Districts as a Special Education Administrator**
Nanette	Forest ISD	Major Urban	Two
Yvette	Gulf ISD	Major Suburban	Four
Martin	Plains ISD	Major Suburban	Three
Chris	Mountain ISD	Major Suburban	Three
Steve	River ISD	Major Suburban	Two

Participants also have extensive expertise in the area of special education teaching and administration. All participants have at least 20 years or experience working in some capacity in the field of special education including time spent as a special education teacher. All of the participants have been certified to be public school district administrators, and three are certified to be superintendents. All participants have obtained at least their master's degree, while three have earned their doctorates as well. Table 2 provides participant demographics and work experience.

Table 2: Participant Demographics

Name	**Years of Experience**	**Educational Background**	**Certifications**	**Gender**
Nanette	Over 35 years of experience in special education; 5 years as special education director in current district	Master's in Special Education/Educational Administration	Supervisor and Educational Diagnostician Certifications	Female
Yvette	Over 30 years of experience in special education; 12 years as a special education director	Doctorate in Educational Administration	Principal and Educational Diagnostician Certifications	Female
Martin	Over 20 years of experience in special education; 6 years as a special education director	Doctorate in Educational Leadership	Mid-Management and Supervisor Certifications	Male
Chris	Over 25 years of experience in special education; 12 years as special education director	Doctorate in Educational Leadership	Principal and Superintendent Certifications	Female
Steve	Over 30 years of experience in special education; 3 years as special education director	Master's in Education	Principal and Superintendent Certifications	Male

Yvette

From an early age, Yvette knew she wanted to be a teacher, and from high school onward, she had decided on special education. While teaching kindergarten, she obtained her master's degree in special education and her certification as an educational diagnostician. From there she spent two years as a special education director, received her doctorate in educational administration, before settling in her second special education director position. After four years, she took her current position as special education director in Gulf ISD.

Mentorship and encouragement from other educators was important to Yvette during her transition from teacher to special education leader. Yvette said, "I actually never intended to be an administrator… I think people saw something in me that I didn't even know." As she was given more responsibilities, she saw what she termed, "some very weak administration." Recognizing an opportunity to influence people and make an impact, encouraged by her husband, and inspired by her doctoral program, Yvette committed herself to a career as a special education director.

Steve

During his practicum experiences while getting an education degree, Steve was drawn to working with students with disabilities. He spent a couple of months working with kids with serious behavioral issues and realized, "That that's what I wanted to do." He spent over 20 years working with students with significant emotional behavioral challenges and never intended to leave the classroom.

Like Yvette, other peoples' encouragement helped launch Steve's special education administrative career. Steve was encouraged to accept a series of different campus leadership roles and district coordinator jobs. While in these positions Steve said:

> I'm sitting in ARDs with my bosses, coordinators… and I realized that they're guiding decisions that… didn't really make sense for the students or for the families or for really making the best decisions for people in the classrooms, because so many folks in administration had not spent that much time in the classroom.

Steve obtained his principal's certification and began moving up the hierarchy of a major urban district under the mentorship of another special education administrator. He eventually took the position of special education director in River ISD.

Nanette

As a volunteer, Nanette became interested in working with students with disabilities. Her interest grew into the pursuit of a graduate degree in special education and then a teaching position working with students with severe and profound disabilities. She went on to become a diagnostician and then a special education administrator.

Nanette described her rise to the position of special education director as a convergence of her skill set and opportunities. She believes that she has the ability to see the big picture and create systems to reach the end goal, and in her words, "I think it just so happened that people saw what I was capable of, and when opportunities arose, it just seemed like it was a good fit." Nanette also desired to make a greater impact and felt that would happen, "if I had the opportunity to serve in a different capacity." Ultimately, her

professional experiences and interests led her to her current position as special education director of Forest ISD, the largest of the school districts within which study participants currently work.

Chris

Chris began her career working in the private sector in residential treatment facilities. She worked with students with autism and emotional and behavioral disorders who could not be served in public schools. She believes she did things "backwards," gaining practical experience prior to going to school where she learned all the methodology and terminology while getting her teaching certification. She said:

> I think it really benefited me because then things made a lot of sense, and I think when I started having to implement the law, I had a little bit more realistic way to do it because I had actually worked with kids that were so severe.

From there, she became a special education teacher and coordinator in a public school district, spent time as a special education director in two more districts, before earning her doctorate and arriving in her current position at Mountain ISD.

Martin

Martin grew up with a family member that had an intellectual disability and a father with many years of educational experience. With his family history, Martin said, "I kind of already leaned toward public education with a special ed. emphasis." After teaching children with learning impairments and serving as a special education supervisor for over a decade, Martin worked in various capacities at different education service centers and private consulting before returning to work in a school district. During this time, he earned a master's degree and a doctorate in educational leadership. He then

returned to special education administration in a school district working as a special education director at one district before moving to his current district, Plains ISD.

Martin was drawn to special education administration initially by a love of the law, but he also found that he loved the way special education worked. He explained that special education is "kind of a structured system" and that "fits my personality because I like structure and organization." At the same time, Martin also said that he believes kids should be treated equitably and that "everyone should have equitable opportunities to succeed." Martin believes that special education directors can create systems of support for students in special education.

Self-Perceptions on the Role of Special Education Directors

The self-perceptions of the special education directors on their own role were deemed important in distinguishing the perceived role of the superintendent from their own. Several themes emerged regarding what directors of special education view as their own role in special education. These include: thinking strategically, developing personnel, ensuring legal compliance, allocating financial resources, informing and advising on litigation, influencing other educators, and supporting principals. The themes are presented according to the frequency they surfaced during the interviews.

Thinking Strategically

Thinking strategically entails planning the long-term goals of the organization and monitoring progress. Where is the special education department heading? What is the vision? How will the department get there? Participants expressed during interviews that ensuring the department had a goal and was progressing toward that goal is an important

role of the special education director. Some participants pointed to documents available on district websites as proof of their importance. Participants explained strategic thinking in the following excerpts:

> I mean I think the other thing that's really important to my job is just to continue to stay focused on what's going on now, but always keep an eye in the future and be visionary and see where we're going. I have to be looking in our data, looking what's going on but thinking about what's coming. (Chris)

> We set our own goals, what we want to work on during the year. We review those goals that we set, "Where are we at in the process of those goals? Are we meeting the goals, are we moving forward? Are we stuck somewhere?" (Martin)

> Our mission, I think, describes what I need to focus on. Our mission is to provide exceptional programming for every student with special needs and to create meaningful relationships with each family. (Steve)

> We have four goals there for this year, and we measure our success with those four goals once a month. We look at what kind of progress we're making as a department once a month. Those are things that we specifically focus on. (Nanette)

Participants used different terminology as they highlighted their strategic thinking. For instance, Chris speaking of being "visionary," Martin asking, "Are we meeting the goals?" and Steve describing his department's "mission." Despite the difference in terms, each statement shows a concern for the department's trajectory and establishes the role of the special education director in ensuring the department stays on track in meeting its objectives.

Yvette illuminated the role further in her interview. She drew a distinction between thinking strategically and everyday-type tasks:

> Again, some of the day-to-day operations are being taken care of by other people so I do put a lot of focus on ensuring our department is headed in the right direction.

Clearly participants felt thinking strategically was an important role of the special education director, if not the most important. Their comments also presaged some of the findings on the role of the superintendent in special education.

Developing Personnel

According to the data, enhancing the professional capacity of special education staff was an important role. This role as described by the participants can be divided into two parts. The first part involves the supervision of persons working within the special education department including evaluations and staffing allocations to particular programs. Illuminating the magnitude of evaluating and supervising, Chris said, "I don't [think] people realize special ed. directors, particularly in bigger districts, the amount of personnel we're responsible for. Right now I have [over two hundred] people that are directly responsible to me." Later, Chris stated that most special education directors "probably know more about HR issues than HR." Yvette also said, "I spend a lot of time with personnel issues."

Part of the time spent on supervising personnel, according to Steve, includes assessing staffing allocations to particular programs. He cited the overstaffing of Low-Incidence Disability services as compared to the staff serving other disability groups, which account for over 90% of the students in his district served by special education as example. First he identified the issue to address:

> When you look at programming for life skills that is very well refined and built out and done well. Unfortunately, that represents about 8% of your students with special needs…. With that said, what's happening with the other 92ish percent? That, I believe, when I say, exceptional programming for every student, when I came here… I look at staffing patterns. We have staffing aimed toward students with ID up through 22 very heavily focused, as well as administrative coordinators and so forth, aiming that direction. I think that's… We're missing the mark and that's why I use the word "every" in our mission.

Martin also found himself enacting this role early during his tenure in Plains ISD. Like Steve, he identified a problem in how his staff was utilized. The then reallocated them to the campuses. Martin elucidated:

> I said, "Your goal is to get out on campuses, and be visible, and support campuses…. We're being seen a[s] bureaucrats, and we're not doing what they need us to do." It took me the first year, but after the first year, that's where they're out. You don't see them on… rarely are they up here. They're on campuses, providing supports to kids. That wasn't the expectation under the former director.

A second aspect of developing personnel involves building professional capacity and training special education staff through professional development. This development might take place through formal training or informal mentoring. Yvette described the importance of developing educators saying, "I see my role currently in Gulf ISD as one of growing and supporting the staff that works in our offices… I feel like my energy is in growing them."

Steve spent a significant amount of time during the interview talking about reaching the department's mission through professional development. When asked if he felt that was one of his major job functions, Steve said, "Professional development is huge…. Professional development is the number one key to get our teachers up to speed."

Continuing on from his earlier discussion about staffing patterns quoted earlier, he described assessing the needs of the department's staff to identify what kind of professional development was required. As a result, a specific focus for training could be identified. In his words:

> What I believe, now, when I look at that under what I'm calling the "under served" or "less served" group of that 90 couple percent, what they truly need is beefed up curriculum instruction, because most special educators, in my experience, are not experts in curriculum instruction. Although, most of their students need them to be.

Nanette targeted professional development that encompassed a broader audience including special education staff, general education teachers, and principals. She deployed her staff to ensure teachers get the help they need as she explained:

> In terms of teacher level, I have folks that report to me that then develop professional development opportunities for general education teachers, special education teachers, and all the other service providers. They have regular meetings with teachers, think tanks and we have opportunities to expose our teachers to technology, to weekly and monthly types of opportunities…. Capacity building is something that is done ongoingly from our office, conferences and so forth that we hold for all of our teachers.

In her view, professional development is a tool for combining the efforts of general education and special education staff in a common pursuit of academic achievement for all children.

Participants' engagement in developing personnel is one of the roles of a special education director. This role addresses supervising, evaluating, and allocating staff and developing personnel through formal and informal means.

Ensuring legal compliance

Special education directors are responsible for guaranteeing that all pertinent laws, regulations, and school district policies related to special education are followed. Participants mentioned ensuring legal compliance in some form or another during the course of their interviews. For example, Steve mentioned it in reference to discussions with other district staff in the implementation of a new law. Yvette mentioned legal compliance in a list of job functions then returned to discussing her role in setting the vision and never mentioned it again. Most participants essentially acknowledged legal compliance as part of the job, just not the one at the top of their priority list. Nanette summed up the sentiment of the participants best when she said:

> Our program specialists know that they have to… when push comes to shove, they really have to look at instruction to a greater extent than compliance, because we are going to assume compliance in all of the schools and not spend a lot of time worrying about that unless something pops up as being an issue…. When you're the [compliance] police, that's all you do. You're the one doing all the work, and others are just making the same mistakes over and over again. We don't want to allow that kind of culture to persist, and so their job is to really build capacity on the campuses so that compliance is a given and it's not something that we have to pay a lot of attention to. (Nanette)

Yvette had a similar approach to compliance. She shared, "When you do the right things for kids and you do it the right way, then you're compliance issues tend to go away."

Most participants tended to relegate ensuring legal compliance to a lesser role of their job, and Chris was not different, saying:

> I try to be the kind of special ed. director that is not compliance based. Obviously I want, we need to follow the rules, we need to stay as compliant as possible, but we also need to do what's right for kids.

However, Chris spent significant time trying to explain why some special education directors might place more emphasis on ensuring legal compliance than her. The following are excerpts from her statements:

> I think there's a lot of colleagues, my colleagues, special ed. directors, I think there's a lot, the old school way is, we focus more on compliance. Making sure we have a good IEP or we're following these services but not really providing meaningful, beneficial services. I think it's, obviously we have to dot our I's and cross our T's.
>
> I think sometimes central office folks outside of special ed., they only think of special ed. as compliance. I think that's some of our fault in special ed., that we have promoted that for many years. We got that pressure from a variety of, there's TEA, advocates, that kind of stuff.

Chris expressed frustration that the role of special education director is sometimes viewed through the lens of legal compliance, and she shares the blame with special educators and other central office staff. Regardless, participants found legal compliance a necessity, but not a job function upon which they dwell.

Allocating Financial Resources

Allocating financial resources means planning a budget that provides the money necessary to support the mission and goals of the special education department. Participants appear to have wide latitude and responsibility for properly disseminating funds allocated to their departments. Martin stated, "I oversee things like budgets, the money, the financial part of it. I am ultimately responsible for the finances." Participants, however, pointed out the difficulties in enacting this role. Chris said it was one of the toughest things for new special education directors to learn:

> There's not anybody that teaches you when you're a special ed. director. I think the biggest thing is budget. Nobody comes to see you and says, "Here's how you do your budget. Here's what the federal rules are" and all that because nobody really knows, and they expect special ed. directors to know that.

Martin illustrated the point, that while he and other special education directors do manage a large budget, they are trained to lead special educators, not crunch numbers. He related a story of a meeting between him, his supervisor, and the district's Chief Financial Officer saying, "We are not CPA's. We manage this budget, which is over ___ million dollars, but that's not our main… our purpose is to be with principals and campuses, and to support." He said that his supervisor completely supported that statement and helped broker greater cooperation between the finance department and Martin.

Despite some difficulties, several participants explained how the allocation of money could support important departmental goals. Steve, for example, called budgeting a "primary role" and a tool to further the mission of his department. Steve described his goal in financial planning as a "budget that represents all of your students" before explaining how he ensured money goes to where he believed it was needed.

Nanette believes one of her core missions is to decrease the distinction between special education and general education and to try and prevent the need for special education services for some children. When describing how she accomplishes that mission, she mentioned the allocation of financial resources saying, "Being proactive in using our staff, being proactive in using financial resources, these are ways in which I believe I can influence the way in which education is implemented to meet the needs of kids with disabilities." She also explained how she used her budget for purchasing

products to further her strategic mission: “When we procure things from our office, where we buy things, we try not to buy things just for kids with disabilities. We buy things that have the widest range of possibilities.” She continued along this line of thought giving an example of a software product that can be used for general education students to prevent the need for special education services as well as by special education students.

Participants acknowledged allocating financial resources as a role and function they fulfill albeit one some special education directors face difficulty when learning it. Participants also demonstrated how the allocation of money could be a tool for furthering an important goal or mission of the organization.

Informing and Advising on Litigation

Participants identified one of their roles as providing information and advice on litigation related to special education. Martin mentioned litigation as part of his role of special education director: “I have certain responsibilities that I maintain here…. For example, litigious families.” When enacting this role, participants inform their direct supervisors or superintendents that such litigation exists or might in the near future. Martin described a scenario in which he keeps his supervisor informed so that she could inform the superintendent as needed:

> If we have situations on campuses that are going down with families that are very involved and litigious, she's [supervisor] always keeping him [the superintendent] abreast of those scenarios, so that's a big piece, because when it comes to…. Obviously, if we're going to go to mediation or due process, it costs the district quite a bit of money.

Steve gave a similar example of informing on litigation and shared, "What elevates to their [Supervisor and Superintendent] level… situations [that] involved attorneys that cost the district money. That's something that we continually talk about." Chris went further explaining the importance of informing and discussing with her superiors pending legal actions:

> You have to understand, I mean I'm sitting here fighting a legal battle with a parent. I have to make sure I understand my superintendent well enough to know when that legal battle goes forward that I'm doing what they want.

In some cases, the special education director is called upon to provide advice to the supervisor or superintendent. Martin described what advising his superiors might entail: "We try to keep him abreast of, 'Okay, we're heading to mediation with this family, here's what we think they're going to ask for. Here's how good our case is, or not good it is.'" Yvette gave an example of a time she advised the superintendent directly on the handling of a particular case:

> We did have one case in particular that went on and on and on over a number of years. He and I talked several times about what's the best solution for that. Again, most of that conversation occurred first with the deputy superintendent and then we did sit down and talk about whether we wanted to, how we wanted to resolve that particular case. That was a unique one because it was ongoing for over a period of four years.

In a previous district, Yvette did not even stop to inform the deputy superintendent on the way to the superintendent. Yvette explained, "My previous district I was in if there was a legal case, I went straight to the superintendent, bypassed everybody on the way, but that was his expectation." Enacting the role of informing and advising on litigation varied.

Whether they met with their supervisor first or the superintendent, they were called upon for similar purposes.

It appears from the data that informing and advising on litigation involves meeting with a supervisor or superintendent to relate information on pending or potential litigation. At times, participants were also called upon to give advice on those cases as well.

Influencing Other Educators

Participants perceive that affecting others, including educators, is an important role to furthering the goals of their department. In this role, the special education directors attempt to convince other educators outside of the special education department but within the school district to support initiatives of the special education department. Opportunities for influencing educators might come through formal or informal meetings.

Yvette brought up her efforts to influence others in response to a question about her discussions with her supervisor. Yvette explained how she meets with him, in part, to specifically discuss ways of influencing principals and the assistant superintendents that supervise principals in order to garner political support for special education initiatives. Yvette said,

> I do bring that to him as well, my thoughts and ideas about organization of the department, responsibilities of folks in the department, how I do work with the assistant superintendents and influence what's going on with principals. You know there's always a power base. I feel like our two assistant superintendents have a lot of respect. I don't mean power in a negative sense by any means. I have learned in this district the way to impact change is to get with them, build a relationship with them and let them know where we're going from my perspective. Then they help me send that out to principals.

For Yvette, influencing others is about building a relationship first, and then explaining her position. Through those actions she hopes to inspire and secure support for the strategic goals of her department.

Nanette stated influencing other educators as being one of her major roles as director of special education:

> I really see my role as one that is able to influence the adults in the lives of children with disabilities by creating opportunities. We have a tagline for our department that says, "Removing barriers and raising expectations." I believe that's, in a nutshell, what we do.

During the interview, Nanette offered examples of how she attempted to influence other departments beyond special education. One method she employed was to embed special education staff within other district departments. Nanette described how her staff also influenced the curriculum: “At the central office level, for example, we have key people in the curriculum department that are actually paid out of our office. We pay for positions in the curriculum office so that the curriculum could be designed universally to meet the needs of the large group of kids.” Nanette later explained how she influences principals when going to conferences paid out of special education funds:

> We feel that in order for all of us to make an impact, we have to work together... We've been taking teams of campus principals to the _____ Institute, which is in the summertime. A whole team of principals, I usually go with them, a person or two from my team goes with them, and we facilitate a planning process during that institute so that we can come back with a plan on how we're going to better meet the needs of all kids at their schools.

The above is an example of how special education directors intentionally influence principals to support a special education initiative.

Influencing other educators involves participants working with and inspiring staff outside of the special education department to help further their department's mission. Doing so involves planning and thought and is enacted through both formal or informal meetings.

Supporting Principals

One role highlighted by participants was the need to support and listen to principals. In this role, participants interacted directly with principals to build relationships and get feedback as well as offer assistance and advice. Martin described meeting with principals to hear their needs and where the special education department could improve. He explained it by sharing:

> My other major role is dealing with principals. Every year, one of things I have done since I've been here… is I go and meet all ___ principals on the campuses. I actually go out and schedule them throughout the year. The meeting is really for them, it's on their turf, it's about what's working in special ed., what could be better, what do you see as we need to do as a department?

Chris also expressed supporting principals is a primary role. She explained what that support might be:

> Well obviously I think one of our primary roles in central office is to support campuses. To help principals, to be able to run their school as efficiently and effectively as possible and support students with disabilities and all kids, but kids with disabilities.

In addition, while Chris certainly understands supporting principals to be important, she also sees that support as having "difficulty conversations" with principals as well. While Martin listened to principals primarily to build relationships and get feedback, Chris

spoke of accountability for principals. As she measures her department's success, she expressed the need to be responsible:

> I think that it's not about making principal[s] happy…. There's a lot of principals and there's a lot of situations that you have to be the one to say, "we can't do this" and we have to hold people accountable. You have to have those difficult conversations.

Supporting principals involved communicating directly with the principals to hear their points-of-view and get feedback on special education services. In addition, support could be offered to facilitate principals' work with students with disabilities on their campuses. Additionally, on occasion, it may also involve the special education director holding "people accountable."

Summary

In this section, a description of the participants was given including information regarding their demographics, experiences, and background. Short biographies of each participant were also included. The descriptions help establish the level of experience and expertise each of these participants have when answering questions about the role of the superintendent in special education and the working relationship with the special education director.

As participants discussed their self-perceptions of their own job functions as special education directors during interviews, they highlighted important roles. These included: thinking strategically, developing personnel, ensuring legal compliance, allocating financial resources, informing and advising on litigation, influencing other educators, and supporting principals.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

This section presents findings related to the first research question, "What do special education directors perceive to be the role of the superintendent in special education?" It is organized by those themes and concepts that surfaced most frequently during the interviews followed by those appearing less frequently. The emerging themes include: monitoring conflict and litigation costs, evaluating special education department performance, monitoring the efficiency of expenditures, advancing an inclusive vision, facilitating the school board's understanding, and influencing internal communications.

Monitoring Conflict and Litigation Costs

Participants, when asked about the role of the superintendent in special education, often mentioned litigation and handling conflict. Conflict can come in the form of both complaints from parents regarding special education, which could lead to litigation, or complaints arising from school board members. Litigation includes actual legal action within the court system and mediations between the district and parents or guardians. Participants perceived the superintendent's role in monitoring conflicts and litigation as to first understand the legal issue before reacting. Second, the superintendent's role is to monitor conflicts and litigation because of the potential legal costs that could arise from attorney's fees and settlements with families.

According to the participants, superintendents first must understand the nature of the complaint or legal action in special education prior to reacting. Chris explained the role of the superintendent as balancing their reaction against the nature of the issue and not to be unduly influenced by the high attention the issue is garnering publicly.

> I see their [superintendents'] role as, obviously I think that they have to balance. One of the big things is parents, board, concerns and complaints, they have to balance that. Those issues with the reality of what's really going on. Because you have a parent… or you have one issue that's getting attention, media that's getting attention legally. Then all of a sudden I think a superintendent can say, "Oh, everything in special ed. is messed up." Or is that one issue…. I think that they have to take all of that in and realize and recognize that issues are going to happen. It's just part, you know legal things are going to happen.

In her perception, the superintendent must understand the legal issues well enough to determine whether it is a signal of something wrong in the special education department or just routine conflict that occurs from time to time in special education. In order to do so, they must not be reactive but willing to get the information from the special education director. Explaining the role of the superintendent in monitoring litigation and the importance of communication so superintendents, Chris continued:

> I could say that my first superintendent was the best superintendent in the sense that he wasn't reactive [to legal issues]…. I think superintendents have to be, they have to be available to talk to you, so that you know what they want. You have to understand, I mean I'm sitting here fighting a legal battle with a parent. I have to make sure I understand my superintendent well enough to know when that legal battle goes forward that I'm doing what they want.

In the perception of participants, superintendents monitor litigation to understand the causes and not react too soon. Participants such as Chris also illuminated the importance of communication between the special education director and superintendent to ensure mutual understanding of the underlying issues of the conflict.

In participants' perceptions, superintendents have a role in monitoring the potential financial costs to the district of litigation. Steve explained that whenever a

settlement or attorney's fees would impact the budget, the superintendent needed to know:

> What elevates to their level includes money that is paid for attorney… situation involved attorneys that costs the district money. That's something that we continually talk about. Those are things…. Any time there's anybody who contacts the superintendent…. I just got an email last night. Anything that has to do with conflict, I either deal or hand off to someone that I believe can handle it. I think that's a key factor that can really draw on the funds of the district.

He also pointed out the conflicts, if not dealt with successfully by the special education director, could eventually "draw on the funds of the district." Martin also believed the superintendent monitors the potential costs of litigation. Martin stated:

> Obviously, if we're going to go to mediation or due process, it costs the district quite a bit of money. Whenever we're in those positions, because really, ultimately, at a mediation, if we have to write a check, he has to agree to sign…

When complaints could potentially cost the district significantly, participants perceived that superintendents were paying attention.

Monitoring conflicts and litigation costs appears to be a responsibility of the superintendent in special education. According to special education directors, the superintendent monitoring conflicts and litigation leads them to respond appropriately to inquiries and complaints when they reach their level. Participants also saw superintendents monitoring conflict as a way of controlling the potential or actual financial cost to the district.

Evaluating Special Education Department Performance

Participants reported being evaluated formally by someone other than the superintendent; however, participants still perceived superintendents informally measuring their department's performance using Performance Based Monitoring and Accountability System (PBMAS), state tests, and principal feedback. When using state-mandated indicators such as state tests and PBMAS, participants stated superintendents reacted to these indicators only when they were lower than expected, and they reacted in one of two ways—punitively or collaboratively. Several participants reported either themselves or their special education director colleagues in other districts being called into a meeting with the superintendent to discuss the results. Martin recalled from his experience in a former district:

> I like his [the superintendent's] quiet leadership and the fact that he trusts me…. In my former district… the PBMAS numbers that we got…. Even though they weren't bad, the fact that we had dropped in some areas would have caused another meeting with someone shaking a finger in my face about, "What are you going to do to fix this? Fix it now."

He went on to cite other special education directors in other districts having similar experiences. Yvette also referenced similar situations from other special education directors.

> I've heard some of the horror stories. I've been fortunate not to ever have to have worked for a superintendent in the world of special education when the STAAR tests come out or the TAKS tests and we see the special ed. services didn't do well, then immediately would fire the special ed. department, get rid of the director. When, in fact, it's an instructional issue. It's not just a special education issue.

This is far different from Yvette's current experience when the district did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on Federal Accountability Standards as measured by state assessments of students' academic skills. It appears the superintendent responded with a collaborative spirit by including himself when addressing low academic performance. She related this story from her current district:

> When we didn't make AYP, [this] was exactly what my superintendent said, "What are we going to do to fix this?", rather than pointing blame on the special ed. department or any other particular department because it's not just one department.

The inclusive and collaborative approach to evaluating special education programs by the superintendent contrasts perceptions of punitive actions by superintendents previously related by Martin and Yvette.

In addition, some participants perceived principal feedback as being the most important evaluation tool used by superintendents. Chris succinctly summed up her thoughts on superintendents' use of feedback in evaluating special education when she said success to superintendents means, "not hearing anything bad." She explained further, generalizing to districts beyond her own:

> In general, I think that superintendents would measure the success of their [special education] department by hearing feedback from their campus principals. Of course test scores are important, but they're not going to come at you too hard because they realize some of the challenges we have with the state test requirement and things like that.

Two other participants echoed the sentiment that principals' voices mattered a great deal to superintendents, and possibly more than anything else. Thus, according to the participants, it becomes necessary to design approaches to work with the principal

and purposefully gather feedback. Martin created a system by which he meets with principals in person in order to provide better service and improve relationships. He did so in direct response to negative feedback from principals his department received prior to his arrival and his perception that "[The superintendent] is very big on principals being supported and feeling that their needs are being met. I think for him, the measure [of success in special education] is that principals are happy with services." Yvette also described two previous school districts where she was special education director in which principals reported directly to the superintendent. She explained the difficulties she faced when principals did not like one of her initiatives explaining how principals would go directly to the superintendent:

> That was an interesting structure because the principals all reported directly to the superintendent. That was sometimes a barrier to making things to make change. But they might get positive buy-in from an assistant superintendent, go to the principals and try to implement some things and if they were uncomfortable with that or didn't want to go that route, they would go to the superintendent…. It makes a difference. It makes a difference.

Yvette's example illustrated the importance some superintendents place on the opinions of principals within their school district when evaluating special education.

Although participants reported their departments are formally evaluated by their supervisor, participants still perceived superintendents as gauging the performance of the special education department as well. In addition, participants tend to agree that the voices of principals are very important to the superintendent's evaluation of their department.

Monitoring the Efficiency of Expenditures

Participants perceived superintendents as the monitor of the efficacy and efficiency of large special education expenditures and annual budgets. In this role, superintendents undertake two purposes. First, they determine the efficiency of special education programing. Second, they look at the cost/benefit of large expenditures proposed by special education directors. In these ways, participants perceive superintendents to determine the efficient expenditure of special education funds.

According to participants' perceptions that the efficient spending of special education funds was important to superintendents. Nanette described the role of superintendents when evaluating special education expenses:

> They look at special education as this very costly program that doesn't seem to… the return on investment in special education seems to be poor. You spend all this money and yet kids are not doing very well. I think most superintendents either have this view that special education is just this bottomless pit of need, for both money and other resources, and it isn't ever working efficiently enough or effectively enough to meet the needs of kids…

Nanette illustrated her perception of how superintendents evaluate special education as being inefficient. Steve had a different perception of the superintendent's evaluation of the special education department's efficiency. Steve related how the superintendent once came to him and asked, "Steve, we have a lot of ARD facilitators in the district, don't we? Compared to other districts… Have you looked at that?" Steve explained that was his superintendent's way of asking him to ensure efficient personnel use in his department. As a result, Steve shared that changes in staffing within his department were necessary.

In participants' perceptions, superintendents also evaluated new and large expenditures in special education. Martin, typical of other participants' experiences, described how he proposes a new initiative to his supervisor who then takes it to the superintendent for final approval:

> We are proposing, as I mentioned, a deaf-ed co-op at a secondary level. She wants to take that to him. Is the community going to support that? Is the board going to support that, because it'll cost more money? It's the bigger ticket items with him [the superintendent].

While superintendents are perceived to monitor the overall efficiency of the department, it appears from the participants' views that they also play a role in approving or disapproving new proposals costing significant amounts of dollars.

Monitoring the efficiency and finances of a school district is an important role of the superintendent, so it comes as no surprise that participants perceived that superintendents fill a similar role in relation to special education. They enact this role through controlling the overall efficiency of the department and reviewing larger cost proposals from the special education department.

Advancing an Inclusive Vision

Participants described the role of the superintendent in advancing an inclusive vision for the school district that encompasses all children, especially students with disabilities. It appears that superintendents promote an inclusive vision by asking directors how decisions will impact students with disabilities. Steve's statement illustrates this type of questioning:

> Basically, I try to make sure that…. I don't really need to…. It's pretty amazing that our superintendent, or all the folks in the leadership, be it our Chief Financial Officer, up and down the line and these conversations of 12 with the superintendent, they will regularly in a conversation bring up this point to me and go, "Well, how will this impact the students with special needs or the kids who are 504?"

According to participants, superintendents promote an inclusive vision by publicly stating and emphasizing that vision in front of other educators. Participants believe that it is not enough to have the vision; superintendents must be perceived as truly believing in that vision. The following are two statements illustrating how superintendents could publicly advance an inclusive vision:

> If a superintendent would say, "Hey, every kid matters in our system, so let's make sure that we have not inadvertently built a system for the masses and not for the kids in the margins." That would be one way that you create that expectation that every kid counts. (Nanette)

> Our superintendent, the message over and over again, is there's a seat at the table for everyone. He's always very inclusive of everybody. Whether all students with disabilities or children that are English language learners, he truly believes in the group effort and that we're all in this together…. That's why I think the role of superintendent is key because you can have a superintendent that is not as inclusive or doesn't truly share that belief. (Yvette)

For these participants, advancing an inclusive vision is a key role of the superintendent in special education and such a vision must be publicly stated so that school district employees and others understand the importance of special education services.

Facilitating the School Board's Understanding

According to the participants, superintendents provide many of the answers to school board questions regarding the operation of special education. When enacting this facilitative role, superintendents appear to ensure the school board receives accurate

information intended to eliminate or reduce negative situations or appreciations regarding the special education department in order to enhance their understanding of various aspects of special education such as litigation. Chris was quoted earlier explaining how the superintendent manages inquiries from the school board regarding litigation. She explained:

> One of the big things is parents, board, concerns, and complaints. They have to balance that, those issues, with the reality of what's really going on. Because you… have a board member [with a concern]… then all of a sudden I think a superintendent can say, "Oh, everything in special ed. is messed up." Or is that one issue…

In this example, Chris expresses concern related to inquiries from the school board and superintendents making quick judgments. Instead, Chris perceived this role in tandem with monitoring conflict and litigation costs. First, according to participants, superintendents could work internally with the special education director to understand and gather information, and then second, superintendents could work with the board to facilitate understanding of the situation. Chris went on to provide an example of how she prefers superintendents to enact this role saying:

> That they are not reactive and they're supportive and are a rock for us. I've worked with many superintendents…. I could say that my first superintendent was the best superintendent in the sense that he wasn't reactive; he was understanding in the sense that, tell me what's going on.

Her example reveals a superintendent that monitors the conflict by telling the special education director "what's going on," receives the information from the special education directors, and then presumably facilitates the school board's understanding of the issue.

Superintendents appear to facilitate board understanding of special education by inviting the special education director to school board meetings when necessary. As Yvette explained, her superintendent invited her so that school board members could get information directly from her. Yvette described a typical situation:

> I am at board meetings any time there's something on the agenda that relates to special education and I'm answering questions when asked, whether at a workshop or at a board meeting about…. We contract for a number of services that we just have a hard time filling in terms of employees. We may have a $2 million contract that goes to the board. We've dropped that significantly but I'm there. They like to hear what are we spending our money on, why are we spending this much money. I kind of explain.

In addition, superintendents appear to facilitate board understanding by proactively providing the school board with information regarding the special education department through presentations by the director of special education, giving them an opportunity to present on items deemed important for the school board to hear about once per year. As Yvette explained, she has a chance to "just bring positive things to the board, whether it's special education or career tech or robotics. We have opportunities on occasion just to go and give some positive information to spotlight the department." Superintendents appear to afford opportunities for the board to understand special education at different times and not only when issues arise through parent complaints or board inquiries.

Facilitating the school board's understanding of special education is a role superintendents enact through either obtaining the information themselves from special education directors or by having the directors appear before the board. Participants seem to appreciate being asked by the superintendent to present on special education topics of their own to help facilitate school board members' understanding of special education.

Influencing Internal Communication

Participants expressed the importance of strong internal district communication between the special education department and non-special education district personnel. Further, participants recognized superintendents as having a key role in ensuring open lines of communication through their statements and encouragement. Chris's experiences exemplify this role:

> In this district I think it's been nice in the sense that there is not an issue and our superintendent has made that known that he doesn't want [internal communication] to be an issue. For someone to be able to pick up the phone and call whoever they want and that's been helpful.

She then contrasted her current experience with a past experience in which the superintendent did not enact the role well:

> In my previous district, I couldn't [call whomever]. If I got too involved with another associate sup. and my boss didn't know every little thing, it's like, "I got to be there." Well you can't every single day with the kind of job that I have tell your boss everything…

Beyond making broad statements supporting internal communication, Chris also remarked that superintendents can influence internal communications by ensuring special education directors are a part of regular meetings with the supervisors of the principals. Chris clarified:

> I think it's probably pretty important to bring a special ed. director up into that associate sup. circle, whether it's cabinet level, whether it's, wherever all those associate sups. are at those meetings together. I think the special ed. director should be part of that. Whether or not the title is there, whether they're a step below, the discussions and the involvement. I think that would make our jobs a lot easier. That's probably the biggest recommendation I would probably give to a superintendent. Because it's just about not being kept in the loop and not having a voice in the decisions going on…. In my previous district…. Really kept us out

> of those discussions and it was only the associate sup level. You just don't get it all. You have to, it creates I think, silos.

According to participants, superintendents play a role in influencing the level of internal communication within the district involving the special education department. They can do so through statements supporting open lines of communication or by establishing regular meetings involving the special education director.

Summary

It appears from the participants' perceptions that the superintendent plays important roles in special education. These roles include: monitoring conflict and litigation costs, evaluating special education department performance, monitoring the efficiency of expenditures, advancing an inclusive vision, facilitating the school board's understanding, and influencing internal communications. In the next section, the perceptions related to the working relationship between the special education director and superintendent are explored.

PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTOR'S WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SUPERINTENDENT

This section presents findings related to the second research question, "What are special education directors' perceptions about their working relationship with the superintendent?" For the purposes of this study, relationship is defined as, "The way in which two or more people or things are connected" (Merriam-Webster, n.d. Simple Definition of Relationship, para. 3). This section is organized into two parts characterizing the nature of the working relationship: indirect and informal working relationship.

Indirect Working Relationship

According to the participants' views, they generally did not meet with their superintendent on a regular basis. Instead, the participants described having an indirect connection with the superintendent giving and receiving information through an intermediary. The intermediary person connecting the special education director with the superintendent is the immediate supervisor. According to participants' perceptions, connecting with the superintendent through their immediate supervisor reflects a level of trust that results in professional autonomy. Therefore, the role of the supervisor is described.

The Role of the Supervisor

In the participants' views, the working relationship of the special education director and superintendent is indirect and through the supervisor. This administrator appears to discern which information needs to be communicated to the superintendent and if any information should be returned to the special education director. Each participant reported to a supervisor who directly reported to the superintendent. Their supervisors had different titles (Executive Director, Chief, or Assistant Superintendent), are embedded in different places in the school districts' organizational charts (Curriculum Department, Special Programs Department, etc.), and have other responsibilities beyond just overseeing and evaluating the special education directors as verified by both the participant and/or organizational charts available on district websites. One point in common is that for all the participants, their supervisor also completes a yearly evaluation of the special education director performance.

One important function the supervisor plays in the indirect working relationship between the superintendent and special education director appears to be determining what information passes to and from the superintendent. The participants in this study noted that they rarely talk formally with the superintendent so the supervisor becomes nearly the sole liaison between the superintendent and directors of special education. The following quotes from participants illustrate how the supervisor functions as an intermediary between the superintendent and special education director:

> My path is through the deputy superintendent, who speaks on my behalf to him and if _____, our superintendent, wants more information he'll pick up the phone and give me a call. (Yvette)

> [My supervisor] is floating things to him [the superintendent] and she's getting his feedback of where he sees things or where it should go, or where it shouldn't go. Really, I don't get a lot of feedback, because I think she handles him, and then if he has questions or concerns, it comes back through her. (Martin)

> I haven't spent a lot of time trying to figure out what is communicated to the superintendent, but I think what is communicated is something that is reasonably positive, because…. Yeah, whatever it is is accurate enough, because I've not had to get in the middle of that discussion. (Nanette).

> Every Thursday afternoon, we spend four hours together and knock out every topic that is either on the horizon. This afternoon, we were talking about the camera law. We've already had some preliminary conversations. Once we get certain moving through conversations, we'll bring it to that team for a final blessing, then my boss will take it to the superintendent on Monday morning and get the stamp of approval based on our recommendations. (Steve)

Each example illustrates how the special education director works with the supervisor who, in the perception of participants, then discusses the information and related items with the superintendent. In Martin and Nanette's perceptions, there appears to be a lack of feedback coming from the superintendent. However, it appears from the data that the

indirect relationship of the special education director and superintendent allows a degree of trust and autonomy.

Trust and Autonomy

Participants' perceptions of their indirect working relationship with the superintendent are characterized by a sense of autonomy brought on by the superintendent's perceived trust in participants' work. Martin, as noted earlier, has no formal meetings with the superintendent and rarely interacts with the superintendent. However, he feels supported in his role by the superintendent. He described his working relationship with the superintendent this way:

> I'm basically left to do my job. My [supervisor], Dr. _____, trusts me to do what I need to do… I feel the same level of support from our superintendent, who has backed me on everything I've done. (Martin)

Earlier, Martin shared, "I don't get a lot of feedback". In the absence of any feedback, as Martin said, he feels "left to do his job." When he does need help from his superintendent, Martin perceives that he has received his support. Martin perceives he has the trust of his superintendent leading to a sense of autonomy.

Yvette also perceived being trusted by her superintendent. She reported feeling able to call upon him when needed, but indicated she rarely formally talked with him. She described her professional relationship with him:

> I think he trusts me. I think he values my opinion. I think when things come to him, however they get to him from me, he has supported me. I don't say this in any other way than he just very rarely tells me no because I think I'm very intentional about changing practices or bringing employee situations in or personnel situations.

Yvette reports she can act independently in many aspects of her job with little or no approval needed. In fact, she has been given the leeway to make monetary settlements of litigation with no prior approval. Referring to the types of information that goes to the superintendent, Yvette explained:

> I have been given from the superintendent by way of the deputy a lot of leeway when we have a due process case. I brief my boss, the deputy superintendent, but we've entered into settlement agreements where money has been exchanged as part of the settlement agreement. I've been given pretty wide latitude. I don't have to call up and say, "Hey, we need to pay an attorney $2,000. Is that okay?" I believe he trusts me in that.

She interprets this as reliance on her professional character and sees her autonomy to make settlement decisions as a result of the trust the superintendent places in her.

It appears from the data that Nanette has only met with her superintendent a few times over the years, but felt she gets her information from him through her supervisor. While not speaking about her current district, but in general, she stated earlier that superintendents either believe special education is doing poorly or "they'll completely trust the person who's in charge of special ed. to just deal with all those things and just keep them informed if needed." She believes superintendents do not involve themselves with special education if the special education director is trusted.

Participants perceive their working relationship as indirect. This indirect working relationship is mediated by a supervisor who communicates information to the superintendent and sometimes returns information. Participants perceived their professional relationship with the superintendent to be based on trust and autonomy.

Informal Working Relationships

Although directors of special education appear to be connected to the superintendent indirectly through a supervisor, participants identified some elements of an informal connection. According to the participants, the informal working relationship between the superintendent and the special education director manifests itself through casual access and recognition of the special education department.

Informal Access

Participants did not report formally meeting with the superintendent on a regular basis, yet meetings and communication did take place through casual conversations or on an ad hoc basis. Whether it was through chance meetings or being able to email or call their superintendents when needed, the perception of accessibility made participants feel more supported. Chris explained why conversations were important to her saying, "You have to know them [superintendents] enough to know just what their thought process is and what they probably want you to do. I think a lot of that is about availability." Chris discussed the access she has to the superintendent more fully:

> I feel like I can email him, I can just, you know, if there's a need to say FYI, I just want you to know something. I'll CC the deputy sup. and other people too, but I don't feel like there's a barrier that I can't talk to him. I think that's really important when I talk about support because you just need to know sometimes what your superintendent is going to think.

Others also described informal chance meetings. For example, Martin reported:

> If he sees you in the hallway he's walking through, he always stops and says, "Hi. How are you doing? How are things going?" He's had fairly lengthy conversations with me. I feel like he's a very busy man, but I feel like he does listen, and he has supported us.

Yvette also perceives having frequent opportunities for informal talks as she shared, "We certainly are in a lot of the same meetings and have a lot of opportunities for more informal conversations."

While the working relationship between superintendent and special education director may be indirect, there are other opportunities for impromptu conversations that create an informal relationship such as acknowledgements of the special education director's work.

Recognition

The data revealed that although participants are trusted by their superintendents, they also developed the sense of connection with minimal meeting times. Part of the feeling of support can be explained by acknowledgements from the superintendent of the special education department's efforts. Participants seem to value the special notice or attention regarding their work, and getting positive recognition for hard work is important for directors of special education. Chris earlier detailed her appreciation for the level of informal access to the superintendent she is afforded, but in the following quote she reiterated the importance of recognition as part of their informal working relationship:

> I've had superintendents who will make it a point to go visit and say hello to the department, to some of our department meetings throughout the year. It's so helpful, because sometimes I think special ed. departments feel left out.

Martin also offered another example of recognition as well saying, "When he [the superintendent] sees me, he's like, 'You know, I appreciate what you do in running the department. I know it's running good'…" Recognition is an important characteristic of

the informal working relationship between special education directors and superintendents.

On the other hand, there appears to exist, a feeling of neglect at times. As Chris explained:

> We don't get a lot of recognition. Special ed. directors don't get a lot of recognition. You get the negatives and the phone calls when things are going bad, but you hardly hear when things are going good; you hardly get the recognition.

In the perceptions of special education directors, their working relationships with the superintendent tend to also be informal, resulting in a feeling of trust and autonomy that is appreciated.

Summary

The working relationship of the special education director and superintendent is perceived as both indirect and informal. Figure 2 below illustrates the indirect relationship superintendents have with special education directors by way of their supervisors while still having a powerful, yet sometimes subtle, influence independent of the supervisor. Each part of the relationship serves the function of connecting the special education director to the superintendent in order to serve the mission of the district.

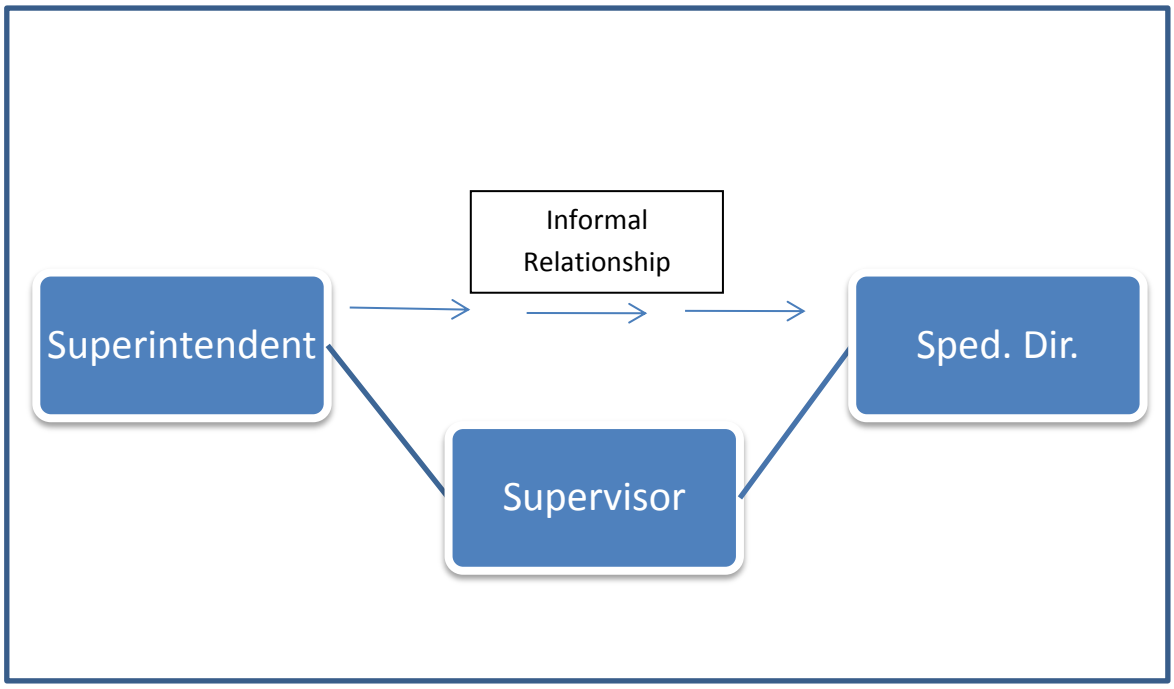

Figure 2: Working Relationship of the Superintendent and Special Education Director.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This study was guided by two research questions:

1. What do special education directors perceive to be the role of the superintendent in special education?

2. What are special education directors' perceptions about their relationship with the superintendent?

Through unstructured interviews of five special education directors of large, public school districts in Texas, participants' perceptions were gathered to illustrate their thoughts related to their self-perception of the role of the special education directors,

perceptions of the role of the superintendent in special education, and perceptions of special education directors' working relationship with the superintendent. A description of participants was also included at the beginning of the chapter.

Participants included a group of five experienced special educators with, collectively, greater than 115 years of experience in the field and over 35 years in the position of special education directors. Findings gained from their interviews indicated that participants perceived themselves as fulfilling seven roles as special education director: thinking strategically, developing personnel, ensuring legal compliance, allocating financial resources, informing and advising on litigation, influencing other educators, and supporting principals.

Also described were the participants' perceptions of the role of the superintendent in special education. Special education directors perceived monitoring conflict and litigation costs, evaluating special education department performance, monitoring the efficiency of expenditures, advancing an inclusive vision, facilitating the school board's understanding, and influencing internal communications as roles the superintendent enacts in special education. Finally, the perceptions of the special education directors on their working relationship with the superintendent were explored revealing a connection to be both indirect and informal.

The next chapter will include a discussion drawn from the findings and recommendations for practitioners and future research.

Chapter 5: Summary of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

As the number of students in need of special education services continues to rise, concerns about their academic performance have also grown. Further, school districts have created specialized organizational units, namely departments of special education, to better serve students with special needs and the role of the special education director has gained prominence as the specialized professional who is charged with ensuring that all students achieve high levels of learning. However, given the increase in special education services and the expanding duties of the superintendent, it has become apparent that there is a need to better understand the role of the superintendent in special education, as well as to clarify the specific roles special education directors enact to better serve students. To that end, the present study aimed to determine the specific role superintendents perform and how they relate to special education directors.

This chapter provides a summary of the study. This chapter is organized into six sections: purpose and research questions, summary of methods, discussion of major findings, limitations, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Superintendent leadership can positively impact the academic success of students in their district (Marzano & Waters, 2012). While research specifically on the connection between superintendent leadership and the academic achievement of students with disabilities is limited, the need for such research has grown as federal law has placed more attention on the academic achievement of students with disabilities.

A review of recent literature reveals that superintendents enact their roles having limited guidance from educational leadership standards and evaluation instruments and minimal formal training in the area of special education (Cusson, 2010; Outka, 2010; Smith, 2007). Possibly as a result, it appears superintendents fall back on what they know about special education focusing on legal compliance and finances when working with special education directors (Chaffin, 2013; Cope 2002; Porter, 1999; Volpe, 2006). Superintendents' attention to legal and financial matters mirrors the conclusions of studies on the perceptions of special education directors on their own job functions. Special education directors, in several studies, report that managing budgets and ensuring special education programs comply with legal requirements as their top job functions (Gunnell, 2013; Porter, 1999; Smith, 2007; Thompson & O'Brian, 2007; Torgerson, 1997).

Despite that research, what is not well known is what special education directors perceive to be the role of the superintendent in regards to special education (Thompson & O'Brian, 2007; Volpe, 2006). Determining their perceptions could enhance superintendents' understanding of their role in the area of special education, which in turn could lead to a stronger working relationship between superintendents and their special education directors. A stronger relationship could lay the groundwork for the better delivery of services for students in special education programs.

The purpose of this study was to examine special education directors' perceptions about the role of the superintendent in the area of special education and the relationship

between the special education directors and superintendents. In this study, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What do special education directors perceive to be the role of the superintendent in special education?

2. What are special education directors' perceptions about their working relationship with the superintendent?

Due to the dearth of research on the perceptions of special education directors in this area, this study has the potential to improve the understanding of how superintendent leadership can impact the work of special education directors. Similarly, this study may provide practicing superintendents with valuable information when building a relationship with their special education directors and providing leadership in the area of special education. Finally, this study adds to existing literature and highlights new avenues of research for future researchers.

SUMMARY OF METHODS

The purpose of this grounded study was to explore the perceptions of special education directors. Using qualitative methods allowed the researcher to gain a richer understanding of the perceptions of special education directors in regard to the role superintendents enact in special education and their relationship with superintendents. Qualitative methods were used in order to gain greater context and detail than information gleaned from surveys more commonly used in this area of study. Since research in this particular area is sparse, using grounded theory allowed theoretical

explanations more closely aligned to the answers of those interviewed to emerge from the data gathered than if a pre-existing theoretical framework was used (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Also, with the limited research into special education directors' perceptions of the superintendent's role, an exploratory study could lay the groundwork for future studies in this area.

There were five participants in this study. All participants were special education directors working in large, public school districts in Texas and have had at least two years of experience working with the same superintendent. The qualitative data collection methods used included personal, unstructured interviews and a review of publicly available documents. Interviews provided rich description of the perceptions of participants while a review of documents from district websites helped validate data or highlight contradictions between interviewee experiences and publicly available information.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Given the focus of this study, it was important to gather information about the participants' backgrounds in order to create their profiles. Furthermore, it was also deemed relevant to identify their self-perceptions associated with their own roles as special education directors so that it could be possible to distinguish their role from that of the superintendent. As result, the major findings of the study are summarized in three sections: Self-perceptions of the Role of the Special Education Director, Perceptions of the Role of the Superintendent in Special Education, and Perceptions of Special Education Directors' Working Relationship with the Superintendent.

Self-Perceptions of the Role of the Special Education Director

Findings suggest that special education directors perform several roles as they oversee special education programs which go beyond budgeting and compliance as suggested by previous research (Chaffin, 2013; Cope, 2002; Gunnell, 2013; Isaac, 2014; Jacobs, 2012; Smith, 2007; Torgerson, 1997). Thus, this study advances the notion that special education directors' roles have expanded considerably, and include: thinking strategically, developing personnel, ensuring legal compliance, allocating financial resources, informing and advising on litigation, influencing other educators, and supporting principals.

Thinking Strategically

The findings revealed that one major role special education directors perform is to plan and monitor the long-term goals of the special education department. Participants articulated the special education director's vision, monitored goals, and/or promoted a mission for their department. This supports Huberman et al.'s (2012) conclusion that special education directors in California also think strategically. Huberman et al. found each participant was able to articulate a strategic plan they initiated for improving the academic performance of students with disabilities in their districts. Although this study and Huberman et al. (2012) were based on a small sample, both suggest that special education directors play important roles beyond what most current literature supports.

Developing Personnel

According to the findings, another major role is to facilitate the development of the department personnel. Thus, developing staff includes supervision and evaluation of

the employees of the department, allocation of staffing, and enhancement of personnel capacity through specific opportunities. It appears from the findings that special education directors work with a number of district employees for which they are responsible. The study also reveals the need to deploy those persons in support of the special education department's mission and vision. No studies reviewed found that supervising personnel as an important job function of the special education director. Only a study by Duncan and Hill (1979) concluded that from superintendents' perspectives, personnel management was an important role for special education directors, but made no mention of assigning those personnel. Thus, this study adds to the perceived roles of special education directors and supports current literature to some extent. For instance, Huberman et al. (2012) suggest that special education directors planning of professional development is a key factor in their attempt to improve the academic performance of students with disabilities.

Ensuring Legal Compliance

The findings indicate that another perceived role is to ensure the special education department and district comply with pertinent federal and state laws and regulations pertaining to special education. This finding echoes other studies that concluded this to be a major role of special education directors (Chaffin, 2013; Cope, 2002; Isaac, 2014; Jacobs, 2012; Smith, 2007; Torgerson, 1997). Given that superintendents believe this to be a major role of special education directors (Chaffin, 2013; Cope, 2002; Volpe, 2006), it comes as no surprise that participants in this study found it to be a role of special education directors as well.

Allocating Financial Resources

The findings reveal directors of special education play a role in assigning and distributing the fiscal resources of the special education department. To fulfill this role, special education directors formulate an annual budget to further the strategic plan of the department. This perceived role supports findings in other studies that suggested budgeting to be a major role of special education directors (Chaffin, 2013; Cope, 2002; Isaac, 2014; Porter, 1999; Smith, 2007; Thompson & O'Brian, 2007). A large percent of school districts' expenditures, as much as one-fifth, can come from special education (Larson et al., 2012), requiring the leader of the special education department to have a role in allocating those funds. According to previous studies, superintendents also agree that this is an important role of the special education director (Chaffin, 2013; Cope, 2002; Porter, 1999; Volpe, 2006).

While the current literature is not clear about how special education directors actually plan the allocations of their department's financial resources in support of their department's strategic vision and mission, this study suggest that some level of discomfort might surface, particularly for new special education directors. As a result, special education directors rely on their professional creativity in using funds to further the goals of the department. This finding related to special education directors' savvy and experience appears to contradict Thompson and O'Brian's (2007) report in that special education directors need greater support in the area of budgeting.

Informing and Advising on Litigation

The findings support the notion that providing information and advice to their supervisor and their superintendent on matters involving special education litigation is perceived to be an important role. Directors of special education appear to monitor potential and current legal actions stemming from special education disputes and update their supervisors or superintendents on those actions. Often times, they are called to offer their opinion on pending legal matters to their superintendents. This finding is in concert with previous research in that the role of special education directors informing superintendents about litigation is important (Jacobs, 2012).

Influencing Other Educators

The findings revealed that another perceived major role relates to positively affecting the thinking of other educators to support initiatives of the special education department. Planning or proposing new programs by the special education directors appears to be achieved through others' professional contributions and support. This finding expands the perceived roles of special education directors in current literature beyond that of budgeting and legal compliance. While it seems the directors of special education enact this role on their own, superintendents are acknowledged as facilitating their attempts at influencing others.

Supporting Principals

The findings indicate that the directors of special education see providing support to campus principals as one of their major roles. This means listening with focused attention and communicating with principals both in person and by phone, and hearing

their concerns and feedback. This finding expands the perceived roles of special education directors beyond that of budgeting and legal compliance. It is conceivable that supporting principals is critical to special education directors because principals have a responsibility to ensure special education programs are effective and also because superintendents take into account principals' feedback when evaluating the performance of the special education department.

Perceptions of the Role of the Superintendent in Special Education

Findings suggest that special education directors perceive superintendents to perform several key roles in the area of special education. These roles go beyond monitoring the budget and ensuring legal compliance, as suggested by previous studies on superintendents' self-perceptions of their role in special education (Chaffin, 2013; Cope, 2002; Outka, 2012; Jacobs, 2012; Volpe, 2006). According to this study, superintendent's roles in special education include: monitoring conflict and litigation costs, evaluating special education department performance, monitoring the efficiency of expenditures, advancing an inclusive vision, facilitating the school board's understanding, and influencing internal communications.

Monitoring Conflict and Litigation

The findings revealed that one of the major roles of superintendents is to monitor conflict and litigation concerning special education department or services. Participants perceived the superintendent as monitoring major parent complaints and law suits to first understand the context before deciding upon a possible reaction, and then to assess the potential legal costs associated with attorney's fees and settlements that may impact the

district's budget. This is congruent with Jacobs' (2012) notion that superintendents stay informed of litigation by meeting with their special education director. Given that conflict and litigation between the community and the school district in the area of special education can lead to negative publicity, signal a need for corrective action to fix deficiencies in the educational programming, and/or cost a large sum of money, superintendents stay informed to better prepare for whatever action may be needed.

Evaluating Special Education Department Performance

The findings suggest that conducting an evaluation of the special education department's performance is a key superintendent role. However, such an evaluation does not include the special education director. Rather, superintendents determine the success of the special education department using PBMAS reports, standardized test results, and principal feedback. This finding partially reflects the contention of Larson, et al. (2012) and Cusson (2010), who both asserted that analyzing achievement data is an important role for superintendents in special education. The use of PBMAS and standardized test results would both give data superintendents could use in evaluating the department. This study's findings also add the notion that superintendents rely on principals' feedback as they evaluate the department.

Monitoring the Efficiency of Expenditures

The findings revealed that one of the roles of the superintendent is to assess the efficiency of annual budgets and large special education expenditures. Superintendents appear to enact this role through a comparison of the costs and benefits of special education programing and new proposals for programs. This finding supports current

literature that found superintendents involved in special education budgeting (Chaffin, 2013; Cope, 2002; Larson et al., 2012; Porter, 1999; Volpe, 2006). However, this study adds to the understanding of how superintendents enact this role by weighing the potential benefits versus potential costs of new initiatives rather than simply approving or disapproving the special education budget.

Advancing an Inclusive Vision

The findings suggest that another major role of superintendents is advancing an inclusive vision for the school district that encompasses all children, especially students with disabilities. Superintendents were perceived to promote such a vision by publicly stating the needs of all students with disabilities. This finding echoes others' assertions that district leaders should promote an inclusive vision (Cusson, 2010; Larson et al., 2012) and ensure the equitable education of all children (Pazey & Cole, 2013). However, this is not reflective of the perceptions of superintendents on their role in special education. Superintendents may see this as a role related to the leading of a school district as a whole and not see it as a role specific to the area of special education. However, this study suggests that promoting an inclusive vision and taking into account students with special needs is an important role of superintendents within the context of special education.

Facilitating School Board Understanding

According to the findings, one of the superintendent's major roles is contributing to the school board's knowledge and understanding of special education. This role also requires superintendents working with school board members to better comprehend

conflict involving special education and provide opportunities for school boards to learn about special education services and develop a thorough acquaintance with the technical aspects of special education. This study adds to the role of the superintendent in the area of special education as facilitators of a comprehensive understanding of board members. Superintendents may better assist school boards if they take a practical approach to their understanding prior to difficult conversations, as illustrated by some participants' experiences.

Influencing Internal Communications

The findings suggest that another role of the superintendent in special education relates to affecting internal communications to ensure collaboration between special and general educators. It appears that superintendents can exercise their authority to affect internal communication within the district by making public statements supporting open lines of communication or by establishing regular meetings involving the special education director and other district leaders. While this role is not noted in previous studies on the role of the superintendent in special education, this finding does support practicing superintendents' assertions that superintendents should ensure collaboration amongst special education and general education staff (Edwards & Vita, 2012). Special education directors are responsible for the education of students with disabilities, but so too are district personnel in other departments and therefore clear lines of communication may lead to higher levels of collaboration.

Perceptions of Special Education Directors' Working Relationship with the Superintendents

Findings reveal that a special education director's working relationship with the superintendent is realized through both indirect and informal approaches. The indirect working style appears to be facilitated by a supervisor, and which leads to autonomy and trust. On the other hand, the informal working relationship is accomplished through the superintendent's accessibility and recognition of the special education department. This further elucidates Jacobs' (2012) report in that special education directors see communication and collaboration as` important to creating a positive working relationship with superintendents, but did not delve into the actual nature of the working relationship as the current study did. Thus, this study advances the notion that the working relationship of special education directors and superintendents is both indirect and informal.

Indirect Working Relationship

The findings revealed that special education directors tend to be connected with the superintendent through the supervisor of the special education director, who in turn may decide what information is provided to the superintendent and what, if any communication, is returned to the special education director. Hence, the supervisor's role appears to be significant in maintaining the special education directors' working relationship with the superintendent.

In addition, findings suggest that special education directors characterize the indirect relationship with the superintendent as autonomous and trusting. This finding adds to the literature on the working relationship between superintendents and special

education directors as being indirect. This finding supports previous assertions that superintendents have too many duties to engage in a formal relationship with the special education director (Edwards & Vita, 2012). These practicing superintendents suggest that superintendents hire a strong special education director to manage the programs and limit themselves to ensuring collaboration and holding educators accountable for results. However, it could be affirmed that the feelings of autonomy and trust may be a result of superintendents intentionally providing them the independence to manage special education programming. Further, given the lack of formal preparation for superintendents in the area of special education (Outka, 2010; Volpe, 2006), superintendents tend to delegate authority to a special education director due to their specialized preparation. As Yukl (2013) explained, delegating authority could improve decision-making quality if "the subordinate has more expertise to do the task than the manager" (p. 113).

Informal Working Relationship

The findings revealed that the working relationship with the superintendent is informal. It appears that special education directors do not meet formally with their superintendent on a frequent basis; however, the findings suggest that directors of special education have informal contact with their superintendent through chance meetings and recognition. This finding adds to the current literature on the working relationship of the special education director and the superintendent through the superintendent's accessibility and approachability. In addition, findings suggest the fact that their department is recognized, especially considering the amount of conflict and litigation that

directors of special education perceive happens related to special education services, is highly valued.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study attempted to highlight the perceptions of special education directors on the role of the superintendent in special education and the working relationship between superintendents and their special education directors. Although the study only illuminated the perceptions of a select group of special education directors, the findings support several recommendations for practicing superintendents.

Recommendation #1

Superintendents may promote a vision of teaching and learning that is intentionally inclusive of students with disabilities. As this study suggests, by embracing an inclusive vision and publicly supporting it, superintendents can influence all staff, including special education professionals, to work together to help all students succeed. By expressing an inclusive vision, superintendents will be making a strong statement that all staff should collaborate in supporting these students. By doing so, they will be able to fulfill a role also supported by Larson et al. (2012), Pazey and Cole (2013), and Cusson (2010).

Recommendation #2

Superintendents may support communication between special education directors and general education administrators. Fulfilling the work of the special education staff requires valuable opportunities to work with and collaborate with persons outside of the special education department as a means to garner support for special education

initiatives. When superintendents make it clear there should be no barriers to persons communicating within the school district, special education directors are better received when calling on building principals and their supervisors. Further, such communication may promote a proactive culture and prevent issues from arising, rather than only reacting to problems as they appear. In line with Larson et al.'s (2012) suggestion, this study also supports the notion that superintendents ensure collaboration. Superintendents could encourage internal communication either through statements in support of open communication or ensuring special education directors have a place in meetings with other general education leaders. Through these actions, superintendents can defend against dual education systems decried by Lashley (2007) as being harmful to the education of students with disabilities.

Recommendation #3

Superintendents might augment the ability of special education directors to enact their roles by elevating the status of the position within the school district. This study suggests perceived status of the position of special education directors within the school district organization by other school district staff affected the ability of the director of special education to effectively enact their roles. Superintendents could change the title of the position of special education director to one commensurate with the title of the supervisors of campus principals as a means of elevating their perceived status. In addition, superintendents could also appoint special education directors to serve on high-level meetings involving high-ranking school district officials such as the superintendent's cabinet as another means of increasing the prestige of the position. While the size of the district may have an effect on the titles and meetings special

education directors might attend, through these initiatives, superintendents may enhance the status their status and effectiveness.

Recommendation #4

Superintendents might enhance their working relationship with the special education director through frequent informal meetings. As this study suggests, special education directors recognize the demands on superintendent's time, but also value informal opportunities to talk with them. Possible actions superintendents may engage in include having an "open door policy" for the special education director, attending an occasional special education meeting, and being open to informal chats in the hallway or before and after meetings. These types of actions by superintendents may allow a positive working relationship in spite of infrequent, direct formal contact between the superintendent and special education director.

Recommendation #5

Superintendents could employ special education directors' descriptions of their roles in selecting and supporting the best candidate for the position of special education director. This study suggests special education directors fulfill several roles, beyond budgeting and litigation, requiring directors to have both expanded skills and specialized knowledge. Superintendents can use their enhanced understanding of these roles to guide them during the interview process to select a more qualified special education director. Furthermore, an enhanced understanding of these roles may allow superintendents to better support new special education directors through mentoring and professional development linked to particular job functions.

Recommendation #6

Superintendents might enhance their working relationships with the special education director by being intentional in their efforts to recognize the positive contributions of the special education department. This study supports the notion that special education directors place a great importance on positive recognition for the special education department. Superintendents could acknowledge the department's efforts through simple verbal praise or providing school board meeting time to highlight successes. Special education directors perceived superintendents engaging in such actions as supportive of their work. This study also reveals that special education directors could feel ignored when superintendents fail to acknowledge the special education department's work.

LIMITATIONS

This study found the special education director's and superintendent's roles to be more expansive than previous studies reported and that the working relationship of special education directors and superintendents were both indirect and informal. However, as previously noted, qualitative studies allow for the development of new theoretical explanations, but they also have some inherent limitations (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Although the researcher employed techniques to minimize their effect, limitations include biases the researcher brought to the study and the relatively small sample size of five special education directors. Furthermore, the study findings may also be affected by the researcher's role. The participants were all special education directors who may have felt some anxiety in discussing the role of their supervisor and their superintendents with another school administrator. This study employed member checks, triangulation,

memos, and peer reviews to increase validity and reliability, but the results cannot be generalized to all contexts. Finally, this study was limited in focus to examining the perceptions of special education director on the role of superintendents in special education and the working relationship of special education directors and superintendents, and did not include other administrators such as principals.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Given the nature and limitations of this study in both scope and number of participants, further research is warranted in a number of areas. Future inquiry might replicate this study with larger samples of special education directors or different criteria for the sample selection. Studies could also include research beyond the perceptions of special education directors on the role of the superintendent and their working relationships. Several possible areas for future research are presented below including the effect of school district size on the role of the superintendent in special education, experience level of the participants, and the role of the supervisor in special education

Effect of School District Size on the Role of the Superintendent in Special Education

The effect of the size of the school district on the role of the superintendent in special education should be studied. While there were a number of congruencies across the districts regardless of their size, a number of differences between the largest district in this study and others, which could be linked to the size of the district, also surfaced. Whether the superintendent plays a role in managing litigation or whether the superintendent delegates that role is one such possible difference suggested by the

findings. In the future, researchers may choose to delimit their study to only large, urban school districts or school districts under 10,000 students.

The Influence of Participants' Experience Levels on their Perceptions

The level of experience of the participants may affect their perceptions of the role of the superintendent in special education. Participants in this study all had over 20 years of experience in some large school districts. Having such a wealth of experience allowed them to draw upon different examples from their career to illustrate their responses. At the same time, it is possible that many other special education directors with less experience have a very different perception of their own role, the role of the superintendent, and their working relationship with the superintendent. In the future, researchers could study any possible connection between experience and perception by delimiting their research to those with less experience as special education administrators.

The Role of the Special Education Supervisor in the Area of Special Education

The direct and immediate supervisor of the special education director appears to play an important role in the area of special education. Future researchers could study the perception of special education directors on the role of their immediate supervisor and the perceptions of the supervisor on their own role. They could also explore the working relationship of the special education director with their supervisor.

The Role of the Principal in the Area of Special Education

Campus principals also appear to play a major role in the area of special education. Future researchers could study the various roles and functions of principals as

perceived by special education directors, superintendents, or principals themselves. They could also explore the working relationship of principals and special education directors.

Perceptions of Principals on the Role of Special Education Directors

This study revealed that one role of the special education director is to support principals, possibly due to the importance superintendents place on the opinions of principals on the effectiveness of special education departments as well as the role of principals at the campus level. Future researchers could study the perception of principals on the role of the special education director in supporting campuses in the area of special education.

CONCLUSION

Superintendent leadership can positively impact the academic achievement of all students (Marzano & Waters, 2012). What role the superintendent plays in impacting the academic achievement of students with disabilities is not as well understood. This study, however, has the potential to enhance the understanding of how the superintendent's role and the role of the special education director interact through their working relationship. Figure 3 represents the roles of the special education director (circles) and the perceived overlap with roles enacted by the superintendent (rectangles). The figure also illustrates the perceived importance of thinking strategically by special education directors. It is hoped through an improved understanding of the working relationship between superintendents and special education directors, and the resulting interaction of their roles, superintendents will better know how to positively impact the academic

achievement of students with disabilities through their leadership and work with the special education directors.

Figure 3: Perceived Influence of the Superintendent's Role (Rectangles) on the Special Education Director's Role (Circles)

While wide generalizations are not warranted due to the focus of the study and the inclusion of a select group of directors of special education only, the following propositions are advanced:

Proposition #1

Thinking strategically is the central role of special education directors in their perception. Additional subordinate roles such as allocating financial resources and developing personnel are viewed in relation to furthering their strategic plans. In supporting special education directors, superintendents should keep in mind the importance special education directors place on thinking strategically when providing support and professional development.

Proposition #2

Special education directors' performance of the additional roles revealed in this study requires intentional support from the superintendent. Special education directors enact a wide range of job functions, some of which they may or may not be well-prepared to fulfill when first attaining the position director of special education. By better understanding the roles of the special education director, superintendents will be more able to provide the professional development and mentoring necessary to develop the skills and knowledge of these important special education leaders.

Proposition #3

Superintendents influence the various roles special education directors enact as they enact their own roles in special education. Although the working relationship between them is indirect and informal, the superintendent does affect the manner in which special education directors fulfill their job functions. By deepening their own understanding of how they influence decisions related to special education services, superintendents can enhance their assistance to better serve students with special needs.

Finally, it can be asserted that superintendent leadership and support is ever more important since students with disabilities continue to lag behind other students in academic performance as measured by state-mandated assessments. Improving their academic success is no longer just an ethical issue, but in the age of accountability, one that is codified in the law. By taking into account the self-perceptions of special education directors on their role, superintendents may find new ways to support special education directors and further develop a positive and productive working relationship. Similarly, superintendents who analyze their own roles in special education and their effect on the special education director's roles may find opportunities to enhance the work of special education directors. By increasing their knowledge and understanding in the area of special education, superintendents have the chance to intentionally and effectively impact the academic achievement of all students with disabilities.

Appendix A

Research Study Interview Protocol

1. Review of Consent Form and Purpose of Study
2. Tell me about your experiences as an educator. I would like to hear about how you got to be in education.
3. Tell me about how you came to be a special education director.
    a. What got you interested in special education?
    b. What experiences did you have that prepared you for this role?
4. In your own words, tell me about your role as a special education director. I would like to hear how you describe your position.
    a. What responsibilities do you have? How do you know those are your responsibilities?
    b. What are the most important decisions you make?
    c. What are the most difficult job functions of the position?
    d. What are the job functions you wish you had more time to do in your position?
    e. How close is your role to what you expected it to be?
5. Tell me about the organizational structure of your district in relation to special education. To whom do you report?
    a. [If the direct report is not the superintendent] How often do you meet? What do you talk about?
    b. During what, if any situations would you directly report to the superintendent?
    c. How often, if at all, do you meet with the superintendent? What do you talk about?
    d. [If the supervisor is not the superintendent] What information does your supervisor take to the superintendent about special education?
6. What do you perceive as the role of the superintendent in special education?
    a. What are the responsibilities the superintendent has in the area of special education?
    b. What are the responsibilities do you believe the superintendent should have in the area of special education?
7. What do you perceive as the relationship between the positions of superintendent and special education director?
    a. How do you and the superintendent delineate responsibilities?
    b. How do you get feedback from the superintendent on special education programming?
8. What else would you like to tell me?
9. Would you like to recommend any other Special Education Director for this study?

--If you would like to have a copy of your transcript to review and/or a copy of the final research study product, please leave me an email address.

Participant ID _____

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